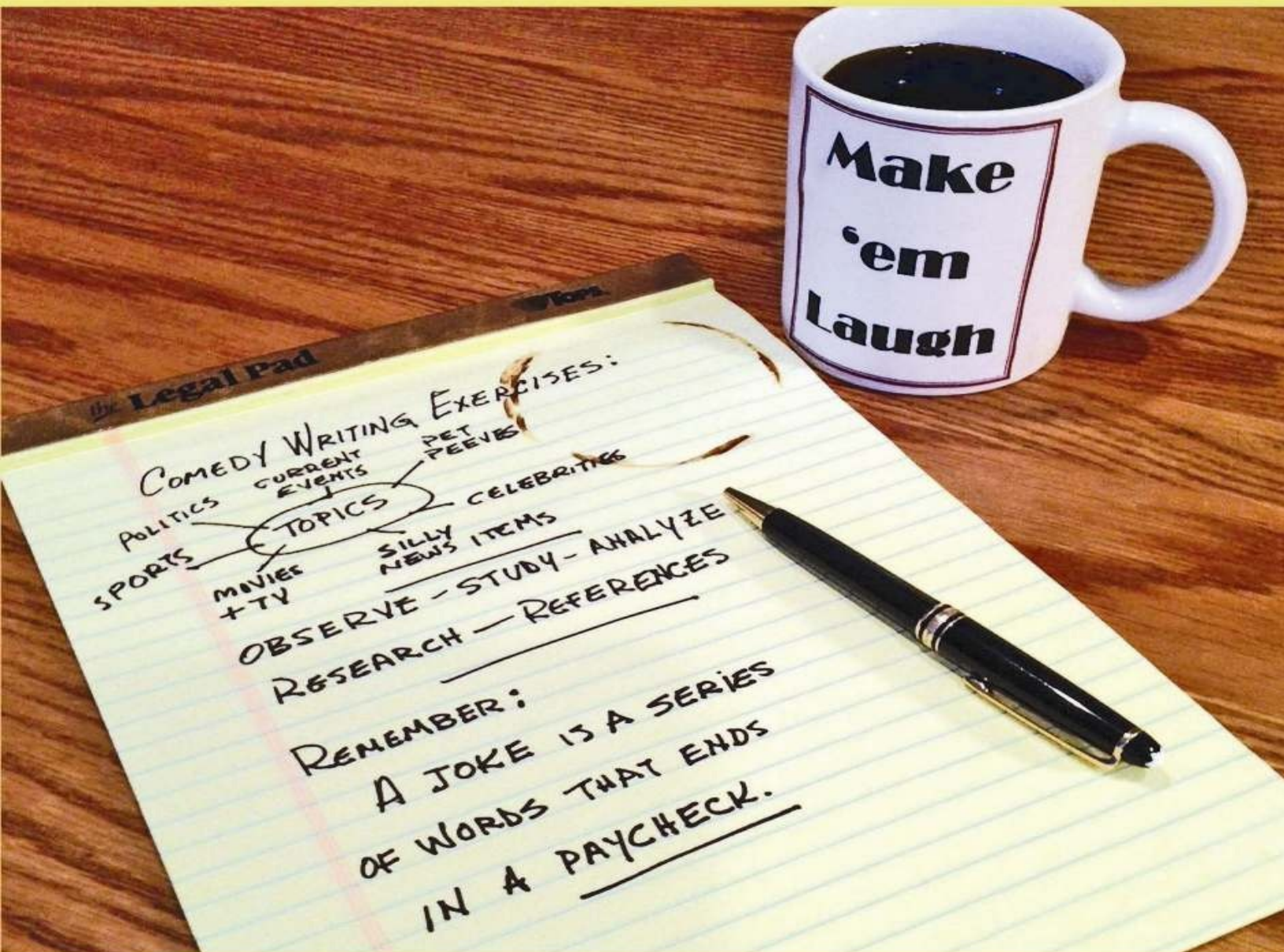


Comedy Writing Self-Taught

**The Professional Skill-Building Course in Writing
Stand-Up, Sketch, and Situation Comedy**



Gene Perret

**Three-time Emmy Award Winner and
author of *The New Comedy Writing Step-by-Step***

Foreword by Martha Bolton

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Fresno, California

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Dedicated to the many Bob Hope writers who preceded me and unwittingly (no pun intended) served as my comedy writing instructors

Contents

Foreword

Introduction

Chapter 1: Comedy Can Be Taught

Chapter 2: Self-Taught Is the Best Taught

Chapter 3: Two Concepts You Can Teach Yourself Immediately

Chapter 4: Learn the Business

Part One: Joke Writing

Chapter 5: Learn What Good Comedy Is

Chapter 6: Learn to Be Good by Not Being Bad

Chapter 7: Selecting Your Mentor

Chapter 8: What and How You Should Learn from Your Mentor

Chapter 9: What Do You Write About?

Chapter 10: Preparation and Research Are Part of Learning

Chapter 11: Teach Yourself to Write Routines

Chapter 12: Find and Study Joke Formulas

Chapter 13: Do Comedy Writing Exercises

Chapter 14: You May Want to Skip This Chapter, But Don't

Part Two: Sketch Writing

Chapter 15: Your Best Mentor Is in Your Den

Chapter 16: How to Watch Sketches

Chapter 17: Sketch Endings

Chapter 18: Sketch Writing Exercises

Part Three: Sitcom Writing

Chapter 19: How to Watch Sitcoms

Chapter 20: Sitcom Writing Exercises

Chapter 21: Develop a Situation Comedy Story and Outline a Script

Chapter 22: Write a Situation Comedy Script

Chapter 23: Errors to Avoid in Writing a Spec Script

Part Four: Graduation

Foreword

Whenever people ask me where I learned to write comedy, I tell them I attended the College of Gene Perret, got my Master's from the School of Phyllis Diller, and my doctorate from the University of Bob Hope.

There was no greater education than watching these three legends in action. Gene Perret is an acclaimed teacher/mentor/book author/writer of television comedy for decades. Having written for *The Carol Burnett Show*, *Mama's Family*, and for comedy greats Bob Hope and Phyllis Diller, this three-time Emmy winner knows his subject inside and out. He's generous with that knowledge, too. I've personally made countless withdrawals from his bank of advice on many, many occasions. He's not only been a mentor to me, but also a dear friend.

Phyllis Diller taught me comedy through her comments on the sides of the pages of material that I would send to her. "Too long of a set up," "Too short of a set up," or "Dynamite!" and "Great!" would be scribbled along the sides of individual jokes. Her words gave me encouragement, as well as helpful hints on how to make the jokes better.

From Bob Hope I learned to "hide the joke," mine the humor hidden in the most unlikely topics, be aware of what's going on around me at all times (everything's potential material), and the most beneficial lesson of all, how to write fast.

By watching Gene work, I learned to write on demand, and I also learned the wisdom of sometimes getting alone to write. Often while the rest of us were trying to come up with a new line for Bob, Gene would step away and return some ten minutes or so later with a page of great material.

Writing in volume is another method that I learned from Gene. The more you write, the greater your chances are of coming up with the right joke. You can't watch Gene for very long and not learn how to organize your material into a solid routine, too.

Don't get me wrong—I bought his books also. But there's something about watching the master in action that gives you an even greater insight into this world of comedy writing. There was something about watching Phyllis Diller and Bob Hope that taught me bonus lessons, as well. I learned from so many of the other legends that we were blessed to get to work with—Milton Berle, Danny Thomas, George Burns, Lucille Ball, the list goes on and on. Bob Hope ran in a nice crowd. A crowd that knew the art of comedy and continued to

hone it until the day they exited the stage of life.

You truly can learn a great deal about a subject by watching the masters of it. Want to learn about Wall Street? Hang out with Wall Street traders. Ask them why they made the decisions that they made. Want to learn about professional sports? Follow the careers of those who have made or are making a name for themselves in that field. Watch how they handle their wins and losses, negotiate their contracts, and talk to the press. That's information you can't get in school. Or even in books. And it's all free. Follow the people you admire. They're your mentors. Learn from them. Read everything you can about that person. There's a reason they're at the top of their game.

I originally contacted Gene Perret because we had similar career paths. I got my comedy writing start in churches, roasting pastors. He roasted fellow workers and bosses when he worked for General Electric. I wrote for Phyllis Diller. So did he. But he was a lot further along in his career than I was. He was where I wanted to be. So I watched him. I read and reread his books. I stalked him. Okay, not really, but I did connect with him. He invited my husband and me down to CBS Studios in Hollywood to see a taping of *Mama's Family*, and then the three of us walked over to a restaurant across the street. He was so gracious as he looked through my album of writing that I had brought with me that night, chuckling at all the appropriate places in the articles.

Today, I can say that it is because of Gene Perret's encouragement, because he saw something in my writing that made him say, "You belong in Hollywood," that I have enjoyed any success at all over these years. Ever since that night, I've wanted to live up to his faith in my writing skills. I've wanted to continue to improve and to make my mentor proud. I hope I have.

So find your mentors. Watch them. Learn everything they'll share with you. Then, do whatever you can to make them proud.

And the best part of attending the College of Gene Perret is, it's all been free.

—Martha Bolton

Emmy-nominated and Dove-nominated writer and author of eighty-seven books, including *Josiah for President*

Introduction

One of the most astounding learning moments I ever experienced was prompted by a teacher who wasn't even in the classroom at the time. He was teaching physics to a group of us in junior year in high school. We were studying electricity, and he first taught us that an electrical current passing through a coil of wire would produce a magnetic effect.

Shortly after we learned this principle, this teacher handed out to the class several doorbells mounted on blocks of wood. He also supplied nine-volt batteries and a simple button that would act as an on-off device. There weren't enough of these supplies to go around, so he divided us into teams that would work together. Since it was the last class of the day, he told us we were dismissed as soon as we could explain how the common doorbell worked.

We were puzzled and had many questions, but our instructor ignored our raised hands and headed for the door. We asked where he was going. He said, "I'm leaving. I already know how a doorbell works."

We looked at one another in confusion. We looked at the apparatus before us. We looked to the door, hoping the teacher would return and make some sense. He didn't. He left us to our bewildering assignment.

My team hooked up the gear, which was fairly easy. We pushed the button, and the bell went r-r-r-r-r-r-ring. A brilliant classmate said, "That's how a doorbell works—you push the button and the bell rings." That didn't advance the world's knowledge of electricity.

Another student said, "We're studying electromagnets, so that must be part of it." He was onto something.

We played with the apparatus until we finally figured out that one of the moving parts—the part that clanged the bell—was part of the electrical circuit. When current passed through the coil, it pulled the metal clanger against some springs. But when the clanger was pulled away, it interrupted the flow of electricity. That meant that the magnet no longer attracted the clanger. The springs shot the clanger back against the bell. This closed the circuit again. This sequence repeated at a rapid rate, producing the distinctive r-r-r-r-r-r-ring of the bell.

This innovative teacher didn't tell us how a bell worked. He didn't show us, either. He simply furnished a bell, a power source, and a switch. He let us teach

ourselves how the bell worked. And we did. In the process we learned much about electromagnetism and its application.

That's the idea behind this book. It doesn't teach you how to write a joke. It leaves you with a world full of Henny Youngmans, George Carlins, Phyllis Dillers, Jerry Seinfelds, Jay Lenos, David Lettermans, and any others you choose. It doesn't teach you how to write sketches, but it does allow you to teach yourself using the principles exhibited by Lucille Ball, Carol Burnett, Sid Caesar, the *Saturday Night Live* gang, and countless others. You'll teach yourself to write sitcoms based on the lessons available from *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Cheers*, *Friends*, *Two and a Half Men*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and whatever other TV shows you enjoy.

The principles of electromagnetism were contained in those fundamental pieces of equipment that our teacher furnished. As one of our classmates observed, when we pushed the button, the bell rang. That showed us that the device worked and that the principles worked. Now we had to figure out how and why the doorbell worked.

All the principles of comedy are contained in the people who have practiced and are now practicing comedy. Many of them went on to legendary achievements. Again, that means the principles worked. By studying great comedy performers and superb humor writing, you can uncover secrets that will benefit your comedy creativity.

When Henny Youngman told a joke, people laughed. Why and how did he get them to laugh? That's your assignment. When Bill Cosby is onstage telling stories about his childhood or his family, people roar. Is it the punchline he delivers? Is it the tone of his voice? Is it the facial expressions he uses? Is it all of these? With some effort, you will uncover valuable information.

The comedy principles are there for the taking, just as the idea behind a doorbell was there for my classmates and me to discover. However, there are some differences between figuring out the ringing of a doorbell and the intricacies of comedy.

First, once we solved the riddle of the ringing bell, we were done. We had conquered the mystery. We knew now that when you pushed the button the bell rang. And we knew how and why. There was no more for us to solve. The comedy-learning process, though, can go on forever. You never stop learning and you never learn enough. It's also addictive. The more you learn about humor, the more you want to learn.

I remember once sitting with Bob Hope during a postproduction session.

During a break in the work, Hope began practicing the motions of his golf swing. He mentioned that he had talked with one of the professional golfers who was playing in his tournament at the time. He said, “He told me to begin the backswing just like I’m pulling down on a rope.” He demonstrated the motion for me.

I said, “Bob, how long have you been playing golf?”

He said, “Oh, it’s over fifty years now.”

I said, “You’ve been playing golf for fifty years and you just learned that you have to pretend you’re pulling down on a rope?”

He said, “That’s the thing about golf—you never stop learning.”

That’s the thing you’ll find out about comedy, too—you never stop learning. And you never want to stop learning. The more you learn, the easier the laughs come and the bigger the laughs get.

In fact, that is the first lesson you should teach yourself right now: You must continue to learn throughout your comedy career. Learn from your own experiences and from listening to and watching others. Make yourself aware of any comedy lessons that are there for the asking.

Another difference between our high school bell research and your comedy self-education is that comedy is much more complicated and varied than ringing a simple doorbell. We had one basic device to investigate; you’ll have countless forms of humor to work with. For instance, there is stand-up comedy. In this form you write one-liners, stories, anecdotes, or whatever gets a laugh for the onstage performer. Another form is sketch comedy, such as you see on *Saturday Night Live*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *Your Show of Shows*, and others. There are numerous other forms of comedy writing, such as writing situation comedies, plays, films, and humorous novels.

There are subdivisions within these forms. For instance, monologists use diverse techniques. The principles that Chris Rock would use to entertain an audience are not necessarily the same ones that Ellen DeGeneres would use. Each night we see Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel performing a topical monologue, yet their styles are distinct from each other in several ways.

Sometimes comics who use quite similar styles show variations in the type of material they use. Henny Youngman and Bob Hope were both rapid-fire, setup-and-punchline comedians. Youngman would do jokes about his wife and mother-in-law; Hope never would.

Part of the curriculum for your self-education is deciding which mode of

comedy writing you want to pursue and which style you want to specialize in.

As I said, it's not as simple as realizing suddenly how a doorbell rings. You will study specific models in teaching yourself to write comedy. Part of your research, which we'll get into shortly, is to find out which mentors you will choose. Another part of your research will be to analyze your own tendencies. Which style of humor do you prefer? Which comes most easily to you? Which comics or shows do you most appreciate? In order to learn to create comedy, you must also learn a little bit about yourself.

Most of your learning process will be based on studying the mentors you select, whether they are stand-up comedians, sketch shows, or situation comedies. With guidance from this book, you're going to select, observe, analyze, and replicate the work of your mentor or mentors.

Here and there I'm also going to suggest some comedy writing exercises you can do to train your writing muscles. These exercises will help you apply the principles you've learned to create your own original comedy ideas. There are even more writing exercises in the companion volume to this book, ***Comedy Writing Self-Taught Workbook: More than 100 Practical Writing Exercises to Develop Your Comedy Writing Skills***.

You may have two questions, though. First, how can a book teach you to teach *yourself*? That reminds me of a George Carlin line. Carlin said, "I went to a clerk in the bookstore and said, 'Can you show me where the self-help books are?' She said, 'Wouldn't that be defeating the purpose?'"

This book will give you some hints on how to teach yourself, sort of like study guides. I will advise you how to select the right mentors for you and show you what to learn from them and how to study and analyze them. You will do all the teaching and all the learning. Just like I did in high school, you're going to have to figure out for yourself how the door-bell rings.

Second, don't you run the risk of studying your mentor too closely? Doesn't that hamper creativity? Doesn't it produce a weak impersonation of a more successful, accomplished original? Trust me—studying successful comedians will only strengthen your own comedy writing skills. Learning from your mentors is the best starting point for learning solid fundamentals that have served others who have gone before.

The mentor idea is one that's been well used in show business. Johnny Carson would openly admit that he not only admired Jack Benny, but also emulated him. When I worked with Bob Hope, he said there was a well-known vaudevillian who really fascinated him. His name was Frank Fay. I had never

heard of this performer and certainly had never seen him perform. Then when we did a tribute to Bob Hope on his ninetieth birthday, someone produced footage of Frank Fay performing in vaudeville, and it was amazing how readily any observer could see that his mannerisms and delivery influenced Bob Hope. Many people find it hard to believe, but Woody Allen says that his film persona was largely a replication of Bob Hope's character in movies. In fact, Woody Allen once produced a short film shown at a Bob Hope tribute featuring cuts between his films and some of Hope's movies to highlight the similarities. Yet no one really thinks of Johnny Carson as a second Jack Benny, or Bob Hope as a Frank Fay impersonator. Woody Allen's films, even though structured somewhat on Hope's character, still remain superb examples of Woody Allen's unique talent and creativity.

What happens when you study others, and even attempt to replicate them, is that you learn the fundamentals that made them great. However, you can't help but add a bit of yourself to the formula. The result is a new, original, creative comedy talent.

That's what you're about to begin with these self-taught lessons.

Have fun learning.

1

Comedy Can Be Taught

Let's begin this book by discussing the "Elephant in the Room." The Elephant in the Room, as you know, is that obvious, imposing item that no one can ignore, yet no one wants to acknowledge or discuss. Let's discuss it. That elephant is this question: Can comedy be taught or is it a talent you're born with?

This is an important question to resolve because a necessary attribute for any aspiring writer—for anyone aspiring to anything, in fact—is enthusiasm. An eager student learns more readily and more quickly. Passion can overcome many faults. Also, exuberance can keep a student striving, forging ahead despite difficulties. Only with that sort of perseverance can you gain the knowledge and the experience that you will need to become a seasoned professional.

A joke made the rounds of the schoolyards when I was a youngster. It went something like this: What has four legs, barks, and is filled with cement? That riddle puzzled everyone so the normal response was "I don't know. What?" The jokester would say, "A dog." Then, of course, someone would ask, "What does cement have to do with it?" The jokester would say, "Nothing. I just threw that in to make it hard."

That's sort of what happens when we question whether comedy can be taught or not. It makes the pursuit harder, if not impossible. It's difficult to maintain enthusiasm for an unreachable goal. If one subscribes to the theory that comedy can't be taught, then it becomes unteachable. Why bother to attempt to teach yourself something, if you believe that the attempt is predestined to fail?

Obviously, this book believes that comedy can be taught. We'll discuss that further in this chapter; then the book will guide you in teaching yourself to write comedy in the chapters that follow.

Before we get to that, though, let's discuss the second part of the elephant question: Is comedy a talent you're born with? To be fair, this book will admit that there may be some truth to that. I suppose there is some truth to that regardless of which talents you're speaking of. You probably must have a certain inborn athletic skill to become a great basketball player, baseball player, skier,

skater, or whatever. But then the question becomes: How do you know what talents a person is born with? Can anyone look at a newborn and say with certainty that that child is a gifted pianist? Can anyone see a toddler and recognize in him or her Olympic gymnastic ability? Can you look at a child who can't yet speak and declare that he or she will most certainly be a world-renowned sports broadcaster?

We don't know what skills we're born with until we attempt them. No one grows up to be a world-class figure skater without first lacing up a pair of skates and falling on his or her bottom a few times. No one becomes a piano virtuoso without signing up for that first music lesson. You have to play "Chopsticks" before you can be ready to tackle Chopin.

Some of the skills that we believe are God-given are really acquired through dedicated study and practice. Joshua Foer wrote a book in 2012 called *Moonwalking with Einstein*. In this book he tells how he covered the USA Memory Championship as a science journalist. The USA Memory Championship is a contest held each year in New York City for people who can perform incredible feats of memory. In the competition contestants must remember the names of people; memorize the order of playing cards and random digits; and perform all sorts of recall feats that seem impossible. Foer admits that he thought he would be dealing with memory savants, people with inborn memory talents that were entirely beyond normal people with ordinary recall. Yet when he spoke to the contestants, they all confessed that they weren't gifted with superior memories at all. What seemed like incredible feats were just tricks. The contestants all used various gimmicks to aid them in memorizing.

Foer was skeptical, but the contestants all insisted that they worked hard, practiced, and learned how to use their memories more effectively. So Foer challenged them. If that was true, then couldn't they teach him those same tricks? One expert accepted that challenge and worked with Foer as his mentor.

Josh Foer returned to the USA Memory Championship a year later—as a contestant—and won!

Intuitively we think of memory as a gift. We tend to think that you can't learn memory; you must be born with it. Foer's experience proved otherwise. In fact, he claims that he learned from this experiment that a person—with study, training, practice, and dedication—can acquire expertise in almost any endeavor.

So whether you're born with a skill or must acquire it is practically irrelevant. Even inborn talent requires nurturing. There are no world-class champions in anything who didn't receive some sort of training. All of them had to learn the basics and then work hard to develop their art or sport or craft. In fact, being

gifted is even more of an obligation to study and improve. It would be a shame to waste a blessing. But even the greatest gift, if it's not nourished with good coaches, mentors, or teachers, can wither. Very few skills are delivered to an individual full-blown. That sort of blessing doesn't exist, except perhaps in a very few savants.

I was quite impressed and influenced by an incident that happened when I was working on a television musical variety show. I was having lunch with one of the musicians in the show's band. He was one of the most respected musicians in the business. He rushed through lunch and excused himself. I said, "Where are you running off to?" I was enjoying his company and was disappointed that he was leaving. He said, "I have to leave now. I'm late for my music lesson."

Here was a man who had achieved great success in music, yet he still studied his craft. Was he born with musical proficiency? Did he develop his talents? It didn't matter. He still had to rush off to his music lesson. Whether his gifts came from above or from hard work here below, they still required more hard work. Still, some people will argue that certain talents are not "teachable," are not "learnable." They believe certain abilities are so special that no amount of training will help. You've often heard the expression "I couldn't draw a straight line to save my soul." In other words, art is an aptitude that can't be taught. Either you're born an artist or you're not. Yet highly respected art schools are all over the nation—all over the globe, in fact. Why do they go to the trouble and expense of opening art schools, if art cannot be taught?

Many things that people are convinced can't be taught can, in fact, be taught. Josh Foer proved that an incredible memory could be acquired if the right tricks were taught to him by the right person. They say that memory can't be learned, but going from a skeptical spectator to the USA Memory Championship, competing against the absolute best in that particular activity, must indicate that Josh Foer learned something.

There are many other skills that we feel can't be improved. For example, speed. A person can run only so fast and no faster. Doesn't that seem like a reasonable and accurate statement? Nevertheless, baseball teams have coaches who are devoted to teaching their players to get from first base to second base faster. Track coaches in high school and college train their charges to improve their times. What does that mean? It means they are teaching them to run faster. How is that possible?

Here's an even more bizarre example. A person is only so tall. If you're 5 foot 11, no one can make you any taller. If you're 6 foot 3, that's how big you are. Now depending on your age, of course, you may naturally grow taller, but there

comes a time when you reach your maximum. There's no way anyone can stretch you beyond your natural height. But wait a minute—I've read in the sports pages that certain basketball players and coaches work exclusively with "big men." They teach them to play *taller*. In effect, they are making them taller than they are. Again, how is that possible?

It's possible because there are many different aspects of learning. We all begin any new endeavor by learning the basics. In our early years we learn the ABCs so that we can read and write. At our first piano lesson we learn where middle C is on the piano and where it is on the music sheet. We learn to equate the notes on the page to the keys on the piano. Josh Foer had to learn some of the basic techniques to aid his memory. We all build on the fundamentals. Yet no one questions whether a child has inborn reading and writing abilities. It's not important. That youngster still should learn to read and write. It's not necessary for the toddler to show signs of piano virtuosity to learn to play "I Am Mr. Middle C."

Next we learn to fine-tune our skills. The child who has learned to read and write now wants to become a novelist. He or she studies writing techniques, story construction, and character development. Again, you don't have to be a proven literary genius to study these things. No, you study them. You learn them. You practice them. You perfect them. Then you become a competent novelist or a recognized genius. The same progression applies to piano playing and memory competitions.

Even then, your education is not complete. I have a friend who is recognized as one of the greatest instrumentalists in the world. He plays with a symphony orchestra, but he also teaches at a university. When I asked him about it, he said each of his students was a world-class musician. What then did they have to learn? I wondered. They learned nuances and improved techniques. Although they were already accomplished and established, they learned to become more accomplished.

If you've ever watched golf tournaments on TV, you see some of the most astounding golfers in the world. They do things with the club and the ball that we weekend golfers—even the outstanding ones—are amazed at. But you also see that all of them have a professional golf trainer with them. They have incredible skills, but they want to have even more incredible skills. They are still learning.

Even at that level there is more to learn. Once I sat with Glen Campbell as he noodled on his guitar. He played a neat riff and I commented on it. He said, "Yeah. Jerry Reed taught me that." There are flourishes and tricks in every profession that the experts can and do learn from one another. I know from

working with many legendary comedians that they had gimmicks that they could employ to generate laughter or to help it build.

If you've ever seen Jack Benny perform, you would note quickly that he had a magnificent laugh generator. If someone did a put-down line aimed at him, the gag would get a laugh from the audience. Jack, though, would then get his own laugh by putting his hand to his cheek and looking out toward the audience with a hurt expression on his face. It worked every time, and any comic watching that could learn from it. (Johnny Carson often used a variation of that when he worked on his show with animals.)

Here's how this book will acknowledge the Elephant in the Room and dismiss it. Comedy can be taught. If you're blessed with natural comedic ability, accept it gratefully. If you don't feel you are, accept that gracefully, too. In either case, though, you can and should learn about comedy—at all levels. You can not only be a good student, but you can also be a good teacher. The rest of this book will encourage you to be both.

2

Self-Taught Is the Best Taught

If you're honest about recalling your school days, you will admit that you said something like this:

I hate mathematics.

Why am I learning Latin? It's been dead for thousands of years.

Tell me, when in my life am I ever going to use trigonometry?

You may have made statements like that about different subjects, but there was always some class that you hated. Somehow it took you longer to get around to doing the homework that was assigned for that subject. Whenever a test in that subject was scheduled, you faced it with dread. You knew you weren't going to score well, at least not as well as you could have. If your parents asked why your grades were lower in that class, you probably blamed it on the teacher. "He's a jerk." And he was a jerk—for trying to teach you something that you didn't want to learn.

That's one big advantage of self-teaching—you come to it self-motivated. You want to learn. You're reading a book called *Comedy Writing Self-Taught*. You wouldn't be doing that if you didn't want to learn how to write comedy. Certainly in school, you didn't browse the bookstores looking for a volume called *Trigonometry Self-Taught*. You didn't care about trigonometry; you do care . . . deeply . . . about writing comedy.

Charles Schwab, who had a remarkably successful career as the leader of Bethlehem Steel, said, "A man can succeed at anything for which he has unlimited enthusiasm." Ralph Waldo Emerson, a renowned essayist and poet, echoed that idea: "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." Tennessee Williams, who was a pretty good writer, said it quite bluntly: "Enthusiasm is the most important thing in life."

The desire to teach yourself anything, including comedy writing, proves that you bring enthusiasm to your project. And as the above quotes show, enthusiasm is essential for the learning process.

As part of a team that produced several television shows, my partner and I

hired writers to work on our staffs. Certainly we looked for writing ability by reading material the people had written, we interviewed them, and we sought references from other shows they had worked on. However, we found that in contributing to the show, the overriding quality we sought was enthusiasm.

Somehow being excited about working on a particular show produced results that exceeded the writers' natural talents. They worked harder, they worked longer, and they worked with more creativity. They sincerely wanted to write well and they usually did.

Being willing to teach yourself how to write comedy—and, of course, at the same time being willing to learn how to write comedy—will produce results that exceed even your expectations. As some businessman once said, “A salesman minus enthusiasm is just a clerk.”

Another benefit of teaching yourself comedy is that you create your own curriculum. Wouldn't it have been great during your school days if you had that luxury? You hate trigonometry, you say? It's gone. Delete it from your schedule. Latin is a drag, you say? Forget about it. Your Latin class is no more; it's been eliminated. Organic chemistry gets you down, you say? Blow up the lab. No more chemistry studies. Wouldn't that have been wonderful?

Of course, the school board may have known what it was doing and some of those “despicable” courses were probably necessary. But they're in the past; you've survived them.

We're talking about the present now. You have a better idea of what you want to learn. There's no need to burden your mind or your time with unnecessary studies. If you want to learn to write jokes, teach yourself to write jokes. Make that the central theme of your curriculum. You don't have to study character development, using the correct point of view, and tricks of denouement to write “Take my wife—please.” But if you want to learn those concepts, add them to your curriculum.

You're the teacher and the student. You don't have to teach or study anything that's not furthering your ambitions. In a self-taught curriculum, you can spend all of your time and energy acquiring those skills you'll need for the profession you've chosen.

Working only on applicable subjects will also shorten the time it takes you to learn.

However—and it is a big “however”—this book on self-teaching, although it does grant you the luxury of designing your own class schedule, will also

recommend studying some areas that may seem irrelevant. The idea is not to clutter your studies with useless information but to help you to expand your talents. Give certain subjects at least a try. You could find that you enjoy them or that you are talented in those areas. There's a good chance that studying some tangential subjects will make you a better writer.

Time is another important factor in learning, and, again, with self-teaching you're in total control of that element. Time is a serious consideration for two reasons. The first reason is that you have only so many hours to devote to your studies. All of us have family obligations, a day job, relaxation, and who knows what all demanding our attention. We can't study twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. With a self-taught program, you determine how many hours you can devote to learning comedy writing.

I once heard somebody on a talk show comment that only two things were determined strictly by time—prison and school. Self-teaching reduces that to only prison sentences. With self-education you can take as long or as short a time as you want to learn your lessons. You can set aside two hours a week or two hours a day. The determination is yours.

The second reason why time is a serious consideration is that certain things take longer to learn than others. As an example, I'm teaching myself to play the piano as I write this book. Some of the pieces in the music book I'm using are relatively simple. I can play them haltingly and slowly for a while, but they're easy enough for me to "master" them with an hour's practice. (My wife, I must admit, is getting a bit sick of hearing "Mary Had a Little Lamb," but since I play it well, I play it often.) Some other pieces are more difficult, more complicated, more challenging for my limited ability. Those I may have to practice for a week or two weeks. It doesn't seem logical that I should allot one-hour practice for all pieces regardless of their complexity.

The standard curriculum doesn't consider this, though. Schools teach subjects for one semester. Either you get it in that time or you don't. With self-teaching you can allow as much time as it takes for you to master each particular skill.

With self-teaching you also control the homework you hand out. That's right, you will have homework to complete. You can't learn anything without some effort. However, since you are the teacher, you determine what assignments will be required. Since you're also the student, you have veto power over those homework requirements. You can't eliminate them, but you can manipulate them so that even though they are challenging, they're also fun and beneficial.

Some exercises are suggested in this text for you to apply and practice. The

companion volume to this book, *Comedy Writing Self-Taught Workbook*, has plenty of practice drills to work on to help you learn different skills associated with comedy writing. Not all of them will apply to the type of writing you're interested in, but you're free to pick and choose which ones you'll work on.

It's commendable if you take some of these exercises and alter them slightly to create drills of your own. That's really teaching yourself to write comedy.

And with any of these practice assignments you're not limited to a due date. Take as much or as little time to complete them as you wish. There's no penalty for being late. That's just another perk of self-teaching.

I've enjoyed teaching various forms of writing for several years now. I enjoy it. It's exciting to see other people get enthused about the craft. It's gratifying to have students get published or land jobs in television or writing for comics. And strangely enough, it's educational, too. I used to run a yearly seminar for comedy writers. A colleague of mine, a television writer, would return year after year as part of our faculty. It was quite generous of him because we were not that generous to him. He worked each year without pay. One time I asked him, "Why do you return year after year to teach here?" He said, "Because I learn so damn much."

But there are times when teaching can be troublesome, too. Many times in a room full of people, one or two can be annoying. Some students ask questions so that they can answer them themselves. They want to show you and the other students that they know more than you do about this particular topic. A few students will try to dominate the class dialogue. Occasionally, a student will challenge the information you offer. Some students demand full attention while they give a presentation but talk constantly while others are presenting. A few students try to dominate all discussions and turn every lesson taught in the direction of their particular project.

It's usually my responsibility as the teacher to control these disturbances. Sometimes I succeed; sometimes I just get frustrated. In any case, I can usually see the annoyance in the other students. They've paid money and sacrificed their time to attend class, yet one or two people disrupt the class and interfere with the learning process.

The beauty of self-teaching is that you're the professor and, more important, you're the only student in the class. You're free from these distractions and annoyances. Isn't it wonderful to be in such a small, dedicated class?

One final benefit of self-teaching is that it's readily available. All that's required is you and your desire to learn to write. For many, self-teaching may be

the only option. Comedy writing classes, unless you live in show business cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, or Las Vegas, are not readily available.

Of course, there are classes offered through the Internet, but the costs may be prohibitive. One thing you can be sure of—if you're teaching yourself, you can't beat the tuition.

Although this book is dedicated to teaching yourself to write comedy, that's not to condemn any formal education, classes, workshops, clubs, or seminars. If you're interested in writing comedy, get as much information as you can from wherever you can. At the same time, though, continue to teach yourself. Keep observing, analyzing, studying, and practicing. The secret to success in any endeavor is to become good at what you do and then to keep getting better . . . and better . . . and better.

And, of course, to have fun while doing it.

3

Two Concepts You Can Teach Yourself Immediately

Many of the exercises in this book require considerable time to complete. A few of the lessons require practice and patience in order to acquire the skills they're teaching. That's understandable. No one learns to play the piano adroitly after only one or two lessons. It requires commitment and dedication. Try swinging a golf club—even after a good instructor tells you how—and you realize that it requires practice.

The concepts presented in this chapter, on the other hand, you can understand and use immediately. Not too many other segments of your training will be as instantaneous. That's because these are disciplines that you accept and apply rather than knowledge that you must acquire or skills that you must perfect. Following these recommendations requires no study or preparation. It's like resolving to walk a mile every day. Either you do it or you don't.

You're both the instructor and the student in this self-taught course. These practices will aid you in both positions. Committing to these disciplines will help you, the instructor, teach more effectively. They will also assist you, the student, in learning your lessons more quickly. Consider them both teaching and study aids.

Before we note them and discuss them in more detail, I would like to add that, if practiced regularly, these suggestions will be a tremendous benefit throughout your writing career. They will help you write more quickly and more professionally. They will guarantee that you always present your best material to clients, producers, and whoever may be interested in hiring you.

These concepts are:

- Writing to a quota
- Overwriting

Writing to a Quota

Writing to a quota is essential to teaching yourself to write comedy. The more you do something, the easier and more comfortable it becomes. An example of this is the routine that you repeat each day when you drive. You go through a series of actions when you first start up your car. You probably can't even recall what those specific moves are, but you do them each time you settle in behind the wheel. Similarly, you go through a series of actions each time you turn your car's engine off. You perform them so consistently and so frequently that you're now so familiar with them that you hardly know what they are or that you're doing them.

When I bought a new car that had a hand-pulled parking brake, I spent several months turning off the engine and then stomping my foot against the floorboard. Why? Because my previous auto had a parking brake that was activated by pressing a floor pedal with my left foot. I was so accustomed to stomping my foot on the pedal that it took me several months to *unlearn* it.

The more consistently you perform an activity, the faster the learning curve becomes. It's more profitable to hit 20 golf balls a day than it is to hit maybe 600 once a month or, to take it to the extreme, 7,300 golf balls one day each year. You're hitting the same number of balls within the same span of time, yet the resulting benefits are quite different. You'll gain more with consistent practice.

When the practice is relatively steady, the learning becomes cumulative. You build on the practice that preceded this one. When the practice is sporadic, you have to relearn much of what you learned before in order to build on that knowledge.

Consistent writing develops momentum. You get in the groove. Your writing develops a rhythm, and any new writing you do seems to flow more readily. You see the value of momentum often in watching sports. A team will get on a roll and will capitalize on it. When they feel the momentum, more things seem to go right for them. The ball seems to bounce in their favor. The breaks seem to come their way. And what do the opponents do when they notice this happening? They try to interrupt the course of the game. They'll call a time-out. They'll fake an injury. They'll try to slow the action down. They'll do anything to destroy the steadiness of the contest. They want to destroy the momentum, and they know that interruptions can do that.

Interruptions can destroy your writing momentum, too. So try to keep the action flowing. Make sure the keyboard keeps humming and new words keep appearing on your monitor screen.

Writing to a quota also helps you build up a body of work. Obviously, if you keep producing, you're going to build up product. When it comes time to send

out samples of your work, you'll have a good supply to select from. This will be beneficial in trying to entice new clients or in sending out samples of your work for possible employment.

Now let's look at what your quota should be:

Personalized: Notice the sentence above said "your quota," and that's what it should be. It should be designed by *you* to accommodate the kind of writing *you* intend to do and geared to the skills and the writing speed that *you* have.

The quota you determine should reflect the type of writing you do. It would be silly to say "I'll write ten jokes a day" if you're trying to write a humorous novel. Vowing to write one act or one scene each week wouldn't be too helpful if you were trying to create a stand-up comedy routine. You have to figure out what sort of production will best suit your specific writing goals.

Challenging: To get the best results you should get out of your comfort zone. Force a little bit of exertion into your quota. To illustrate the value of this, imagine a golfer who wants to improve his putting so he decides to hit thirty putts each day. That's commendable. However, suppose he puts the ball down in each instance only eight inches away from the cup. That's not going to produce worthwhile results. It doesn't challenge his skills, so it won't improve them.

Likewise, you as a writer must devise a quota that has some bite to it. Your quota has to be demanding enough to be beneficial. A comedy writer who says "I'll write one joke a day" or a novelist who says "I'll write thirty words of my novel each day" will not produce significant results.

As they say with physical exercise, "No pain; no gain"; you have to crank some pain, some discomfort into your personalized quota.

Reasonable: Just as there is no value in designing a quota that has no challenge to it, so there is no benefit in devising a quota that is too demanding or even impossible. The idea is to work steadily toward a goal, not drive yourself to a nervous breakdown. Let's return to our golfer who practiced faithfully, but only on eight-inch putts. Now let's imagine that he goes out every day and hits thirty putts that are all over fifty feet long. What's the point? Putts that long do require some skill, but mostly they demand pure luck. You can't practice, nor can you perfect, luck. This practice time, too, is wasted.

It would be just as silly and nonproductive for a writer to pledge to write two hundred one-liners each day or to write five half-hour sitcoms each week. These demands are—well, they're too demanding.

Not only do they not produce usable results, but they tend to be

discouraging. You find you can't keep up the impossible pace, so you abandon your efforts with the excuse, "Well, I tried, but I couldn't do it."

Set goals or quotas that are challenging but attainable.

Specific: It's hard to meet a quota if you don't really know what that quota is. "I'll write a lot of one-liners today." "I'll write jokes until I can't think of anything funny to write anymore." With these sorts of quotas, you don't really know when you've achieved them. They're too vague. How much is a lot? How can you be sure that you've exhausted all the "funniness" that's in you?

Specify the quantity. Vow to write five jokes a day. Vow to write ten jokes a day. You determine how many you can write because it is your personalized quota, but do make that goal measurable. Determining to write a bunch of pages is not really a quota. Determining to write ten pages is. Determining today to write a lot of words in your novel is not a quota. Determining to write 2,500 words today is.

Goal-oriented: This attribute, too, has to do with being specific. Your quota should guarantee that when you meet it, you have product in hand. It is specific to say "I'll work on my writing for two hours today—from 10 a.m. to noon." That's definitely specific, but it doesn't necessarily generate any tangible results. It's quite possible that you could sit at the keyboard for those two hours and produce no usable results. Nevertheless, you've fulfilled your promise. You worked for two hours.

It's commendable that you are dedicated enough to sit at your keyboard for that long. However, it's more commendable if you generate quality material while you're sitting there. I'm pretty sure that when your boss hands you a work assignment he doesn't say, "Work on this for a week." He'd be more likely to say, "Have this on my desk by Friday." Results are what count; not how long it takes you to achieve them.

You're better served if you assign a specific goal to your work. It's fine to set aside two hours to do it in, but make sure that your two hours of effort create a concrete product. If you reach that goal early, you can take some time off or keep going and produce even more results. If you don't achieve your specific goal, maybe you have to stay at the keyboard a little longer.

Clients can buy only results, not effort.

Divided into reasonably short segments: We've already discovered that interruptions are momentum breakers. However, you can't write continuously. Both you and your computer deserve a rest sometime. The trick now is to keep

the interruptions from interfering with the momentum as much as possible. This is accomplished by keeping the work periods relatively steady. Set your quota for as short a period as is reasonable.

Strangely, there is a difference between resolving to write one act of my four-act teleplay this week and resolving to write all four acts of my teleplay by the end of the month. One function of your quota is to keep you turning out material at a fairly steady rate. Presumably, if you stick to your quota, you will do that.

But let's look at this difference more closely. Resolving to write four acts of your teleplay by the end of the month means that if you don't produce one act at the end of the first week, you're still on quota. Right? If you still have nothing on paper by the end of the second week, you're still on quota. If you continue to get no writing done, you're still on quota at the end of the third week. Now you have only one week left to get four acts written. You've moved into the "unreasonable" area of your quota. In effect, you're still living up to your promised quota, but you have destroyed the momentum.

However, if you determine to write one act of your teleplay each week, and you get nothing done that first week, you're now off quota. You have to get yourself moving. So as we discussed earlier, it's more beneficial to hit 20 golf balls a day than it is to put it off and hit 600 at the end of the month.

But again, this is your quota. You design it. You can set a schedule that demands daily results or you can set one that allows for results every other day. You can even set weekly goals. Going beyond that time span, though, may defeat the purpose of the quota system.

Another thing that setting shorter time periods accomplishes is that it maintains your interest and enthusiasm in your writing. Putting your quota off for months at a time is tempting fate. It's too easy to lose passion and abandon your original goal.

Overwriting

The second concept is to overwrite. Overwriting doesn't imply that you should add so much to your writing that it becomes poorly written. It doesn't demand that you add bulk to your writing just to get more words onto the paper. What it does mean is that you deliver a little more than is required of you. Always deliver enough of an overflow to allow you or your client to select the best of your output. For instance, if a comedian needs two jokes for an opening segment, you deliver ten. If a sitcom script demands a new punchline on page 15,

you jot five or six possible improvements in the margin. You, the producer, or the actor can then select the one that works best. If you're searching for the next plot point in your teleplay, it may be nice to generate several possibilities. This permits you to consider them all and select the best option.

Overwriting is a fine habit for a comedy writer to develop for several reasons:

It improves the quality of your work: Obviously, by writing more you increase the quantity of your work. Are we suggesting then that in comedy quantity is more important than quality? No, but we are saying that quantity can improve quality. You have more to choose from so your final selections should be top level.

I often illustrate this point by recalling one high school in my hometown that was a perennial football powerhouse. This team was consistently so strong that it was almost a physical threat to many of the other school teams. Why was it so overwhelmingly powerful year in and year out? One reason was that the team had a student body that was five times larger than its competitors. With more students to choose from, the coaches could pick players with more size and bulk. The talent pool was larger so the team usually had more skilled players, too.

Similarly, if you have a client who needs five good jokes and you furnish twenty-five, he or she will be able to pick the five best. That improves the resultant quality.

It helps you to go beyond the obvious: With many humorous premises there are some *easy* jokes—the references or the punchlines are predictable to practically everyone. There are some jokes that everyone writes—especially nonprofessionals. These are the obvious gags. Often these are the *cheap* jokes.

Just as these jokes immediately pop into the heads of nonwriters, they jump into the minds of professional comedy writers, too. Only by sticking with the premise and looking for more references and ideas do you come up with jokes that are unique, unexpected, surprising, and funnier.

Those are the jokes that you want to write, but if you don't resolve to work a little further into the project, to give more than the bare minimum, you may never reach the brilliant lines.

It ensures that you have thought through all of the possibilities: Consider Jeff Foxworthy's signature routine "You might be a redneck if . . ." That premise feels quite limited. If you were assigned to write punchlines based on that setup, you'd have a difficult time coming up with ten to fifteen solid gags. Yet look at what that setup has produced. Foxworthy, I'm sure, has done

hundreds of variations on that line from the stage. He has published books that probably list thousands of solid, funny punchlines based on the redneck premise. And as many as are out there today, thousands more will be written and published in the future. The possibilities are endless.

Yet the temptation is there for us comedy writers to say to ourselves about any subject, “There is nothing else funny about this topic.” However, more, and many times better, lines are still available. By writing a little bit beyond what we feel is our limit, and by vowing to do a little more than what is required of us, we may be able to find more interesting, different, and funny lines. At least we know that we have explored beyond the average amount of possibilities.

It prevents us from quitting too soon: To me, this is one of the biggest faults of comedy writers—we quit too soon. We give up much too early on both the premise we’re working on and the specific joke we’re working on. Our tendency is to say, “Well, I’ve written a joke, now I can start writing the next joke.” But is that joke you’ve written in the best possible form to extract laughs. Would a word change improve it? Would a more well-defined setup line help the punch? Would a different payoff be funnier?

This advice to write more applies not only to the quantity of writing but also to the quality of your writing. If you give each joke a little more thought, you may provide better jokes.

We may also quit too soon on a premise. If we’re writing a sitcom, we may assign action and dialogue to the characters and then move on. But might there be different actions the characters could take in this situation? Are there different words they could say? All of this is worth a little more consideration.

I’ll repeat these ideas again because they will be useful in teaching yourself to write comedy and because they will be extremely helpful to you throughout your comedy writing career. Write to a quota and overwrite.

4

Learn the Business

The PAL was a big deal in our neighborhood when I was young. PAL was an acronym for the Police Athletic League. The local police precincts would form youth teams and play against each other around the city. I played baseball for them, as did almost every other kid in the area. One day, the sergeant who managed our team invited us into the gym in the basement of the 41st Precinct. To us youngsters, it was spectacular. It was a regular gym, just like we would see in the movies. It had punching bags and dumbbells, and the pièce de résistance was an actual boxing ring right there in the center of the room.

The policemen who ran this precinct's PAL were putting together a boxing team. They gave us a few lessons on how to jab and protect ourselves from a jab and a little bit of basic footwork for a boxer. It was heady stuff for kids our age, and we all decided to become boxers. I thought it would be a wonderful life because all of the fighters I saw were famous, they were rich, they dressed nice, and they were surrounded by gorgeous women. It was everything a twelve-year-old longed for in life.

After our fundamental boxing lessons, the policemen paired us off for a few rounds of actual sparring. I was put in against a kid I didn't even know, but I was quick and clever so I thought he'd be no match for me.

I threw a few jabs as we were taught, and I blocked his as I was taught. Then he abandoned the standard moves and launched an uppercut that stunned and staggered me. The cop who was refereeing immediately stopped the boxing and told me to go take a break. I was happy to.

I went into the bathroom and threw some water on my face to refresh my woozy self. When I glanced in the mirror, I noticed that all my teeth were outlined in blood. My opponent didn't knock any of my teeth out, but he did jar them loose from their moorings a tad. He also jarred loose my desire to become a famous, rich, well-dressed, womanizing boxer.

My dreams of becoming a vicious, determined fighter who would waffle opponents around the head and face were appealing to me. Once it dawned on me that other folks might want to waffle me around the head and face, I wisely

opted out of that particular sport. The purpose of this parable is to illustrate that any profession you aspire to will probably have some hidden setbacks in it. Comedy writing is not exempted. You may have your teeth figuratively but ignominiously jarred loose from time to time.

Before we throw ourselves into the craft of comedy writing, we should take a realistic view of the business. Look at what's ahead and be prepared for it. The following are a few of the realities you should foresee:

Not every joke you write will be great: Some days, none of them will be great. As in any profession, you'll have "on" days and "off" days. The good news is that you don't have to produce brilliance with every line you write. A fair percentage is all you need to succeed in the comedy writing business. If you can create good comedy material, that's enough. It doesn't matter how much of your work you send to the trash can. You don't get penalized for the gags you throw away; you do get rewarded for the ones you sell.

This doesn't imply that you can take it easy and just produce a few good lines. Not at all. You strive to turn out the funniest material each time you tap on the keyboard. The reality, though, is that you won't. A baseball player tries to get a hit each time he comes to the plate, but he doesn't. If he bats .300, he's a star. But he still has to try to get a hit each time he comes to the plate. If he relaxes two-thirds of the time, he'll bat only .100. That will get him sent back to the minors. Likewise, as a comedy writer, you must offer full effort and devotion to everything you write, but you must be resigned to the fact that you won't ever bat 1.000.

Enthusiasm is one of the greatest attributes a comedy writer can have. It fuels your inspiration. It makes you turn out more and better material. It keeps you striving. If you look too hard at the mediocre material that you will inevitably produce (because everyone, and I mean everyone, produces some mediocre material), you'll get discouraged. You can lose the necessary enthusiasm.

One time I handed in some material to Bob Hope. He hefted the envelope in his hand (we used to kid that Bob Hope bought jokes by the pound) and said to me, "Is this stuff brilliant?" It wasn't, and I had to confess that. I said, "Actually, Bob, it's really not." He was stunned a bit by my honesty, but then he said, "That's OK. The other guys will be on."

That's the realistic attitude you should adopt about your own writing. If today's production was only fair, that's OK. Some other day you'll be great.

Your career will progress one step at a time: When professional climbers plan to scale a specific mountain, they spend much time in preparation.

They gather equipment, clothing, and whatever else a mountain climber needs to climb a mountain. They realize the trip will be arduous and must be done in increments. Very few professional mountain climbers will gaze at Mount Kilimanjaro and say, “I think I can do this in one jump.”

A career in comedy writing is accomplished in increments, too. You try to get a foothold somehow and then you use that to proceed to the next level. Your career grows according to your credits.

It’s good that your career will grow in stages, because at each level you learn something about your writing. Each writing experience should make you a better writer. It also slows you down—which actually will help you establish a more accomplished long-term writing career. When we begin any endeavor, we’re eager to succeed in it. The achievement always seems much more satisfying than the apprenticeship years. We all tend to want what we want *now*. The danger in that is you could go into a difficult profession unprepared.

You often hear that many new business ventures fail because they were underfunded. The entrepreneurs weren’t financially prepared to go the distance. In comedy writing, it’s to your advantage to spend a little more time in the formative stages, so that you’re ready for whatever comes your way when you get your break. Should you get your break early and you can’t handle the demands, you could be out of the profession. If that happens, it’s much more difficult to get back in.

You could price yourself out of a career: Successful comedy writers make pretty good money. But you may not . . . yet. As we discussed, your career usually progresses in graduated steps. Probably your financial rewards will, too.

Now don’t get me wrong. Earn as much as you can as quickly as you can. That’s only good business. But be wary of *trying* to make too much too soon.

The danger is that you read about exorbitant pay for some writers and assume you’re entitled to the same. What you must remember is that those writers earned their way to that income level. I once attended a writer’s party and overheard one writer boasting, “I’m in negotiations for my book.” A listener asked, “How’s it going?” The writer said, “Well, we’re at an impasse. I’m demanding a \$200,000 advance and they’re refusing to read my manuscript.”

Sure, there are writers who command six-figure advances. Apparently, this guy wasn’t one of them. You may read about some gag writers who get \$75 or \$100 for a single joke from national comedians. But if you have a chance to have a local comic try out some of your material when he appears for a weekend at a small local comedy club, I doubt if you can demand a hundred bucks a gag.

So be wary. If you demand too much too soon, you could price yourself out of a career.

It's never "your turn": I've known comics who get frustrated and discouraged because a fellow comic gets a big break. Someone they've worked with on the comedy circuit for years gets a call from the network, lands a pilot, gets a slot on the schedule, has a hit, and makes a fortune. Now these comics get upset because "I've been doing comedy longer than he has. It should have been my turn." That's the point—there is no "your turn." When you begin in the profession, you don't pick a number like you do in a crowded bakery and wait for the clerk to call your ticket. It's not really a haphazard process, but it's not as orderly as being assigned a place in line.

It's too much of a cliché to say that hard work and effort are always rewarded. Sometimes the comic who gets the break ahead of you is not deserving of it. Nevertheless, that's the way the system works. Live with it.

You can't let the success of others deter you from the work you want to do. You just have to keep working as if "your turn" will come. You just don't know when.

It takes awhile for the world to recognize your talent: In 1964, Sonny Liston was the reigning heavyweight champion of the world. He was so fierce that many fighters avoided getting into the ring with him. One contender, in fact, refused to fight him. This fighter's manager said, "We don't even want to run into Sonny Liston on the street." But a young Cassius Clay did challenge him.

Very few reporters and boxing experts gave Clay a chance. He was the decided underdog. In fact, it's reported that only two sportswriters predicted that Clay would win. He did win, though. A battered Liston failed to answer the bell for the seventh round, making Clay a winner by technical knockout.

You all know the rest of the story. Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali and was known as "The Greatest." Many do consider him among the greatest boxers of all time. He was just as great before he defeated the awesome Sonny Liston as he was afterward. The problem was that very few of the experts knew it.

The world is reluctant to recognize greatness. Before they will concede it, you must prove it to them time and time again.

Once I was in the green room of a national telethon for some cause or another. Two other writers were in the room at the time. One was a newcomer

to television and the other was a well-known wit. The youngster was throwing lines that were hilarious. He had the room in stitches. A comic was there waiting to go on to entertain on camera. He turned to the old pro and said, “I should hire you to write lines like that for me.”

Notice, he didn’t ask the young writer to write the lines. He asked the veteran, even though it was the newcomer who was doing all the funny lines. The comedy world, including this particular comic, was not ready to admit yet that the youngster had amazing talent. That’s just part of the business and one of those obstacles that you must patiently endure. Eventually, as they did in Cassius Clay’s case, they’ll recognize your skill.

You will be rejected: Like it or not, rejection is part of the writing life. I opened this chapter with a boxing parable and just finished talking about a famous and skillful boxer, Cassius Clay, who later changed his name to Muhammad Ali. I’ll use the fight game once again to make a point. I opted out of a boxing career once I realized that people were going to try to punch me in the kisser. Others like Muhammad Ali embraced boxing and built a legendary career in it. But all of those who do pursue a fighting career know that sooner or later someone is going to clobber them upside the head. It’s part of the sport.

Rejection is part of writing. All writers get rejected at some time or another—even the most successful ones. Yes, they can get their books published, but maybe the publisher may ask that Chapter Four be rewritten. That’s rejection. Being rebuffed will always be a threat to a writer. It’s never pleasant, but it’s also not the curse that we sometimes make it out to be. In fact, we’ll see that it can be a blessing.

Consider that being turned down by a publisher, an agent, or a client is not a condemnation of your product. There are many reasons why material may be refused. Perhaps a particular comic simply can’t afford more material at this time. Maybe a show you’re submitting a spec script to already has an idea similar to yours in the works. A certain comic may appreciate your humor but realize that it’s not compatible with his or her comedy style. And, of course, sometimes the comic may just think your stuff is terrible, but not always.

On one show I produced we needed a performer to play the love interest of one of our stars. It would be a part in only one episode. Several agents sent their clients to audition for our show. We had only one part to offer, but we had about nineteen applicants. If you do the math, it quickly becomes obvious that eighteen of them would not get the part. That doesn’t mean that eighteen of them were horrible performers. No. It simply means that we could hire only one.

Rejection can often be an incentive to improve the quality of your work. I knew a writer who submitted a piece to *Reader's Digest*. The article may have run six pages. The assigned editor sent back a twelve-page letter critiquing the submission and offering various suggestions. The author followed that critique in rewriting the article, which did sell to the magazine. Not only did this article sell, but over time several others also sold. At one point this author was the leading freelance contributor to *Reader's Digest*, a periodical that pays quite well.

Another friend of mine wrote a sitcom and submitted it to a specific show. Almost as soon as he sent it off, however, he was dissatisfied with it and knew it would not sell or impress the producer. He immediately began work on another spec script and sent it to the same show. As his new script was on its way to the producers, the producer's decision on the first spec script was on its way to the author.

The first show was soundly rejected. But on reading the second script, the producer called his agent and said, "Hire this guy." Just a couple of years later, the author and the producer were coproducing a new television series.

You can't allow rejections to discourage you.

Earlier I said that rejection can sometimes be a blessing. Consider the casting call where eighteen of nineteen hopefuls were rejected. The following year, my partner and I were producing another show and needed an actress for a repeating role. We remembered one of the rejectees from that casting call and offered her a job on our new show. Being turned down for a one-week acting gig resulted in a twenty-six-week job. That can be considered a blessing.

It's beneficial to learn the peaks and valleys of the profession you're pursuing. Be prepared for the pitfalls and hang in for the long run. And remember, all things considered, it's probably less painful than boxing.

Now let's move on to the fun stuff—learning to write comedy.

Part One: Joke Writing

A Brief Introduction to Joke Writing

A joke is anything that makes people laugh. A joke can be a series of words, an action, a reaction. It can even, in certain instances, be strategic silence.

A joke is the basic building block of humor. It's the smallest unit of comedy, yet it's necessary to build the larger constructions of comedy—sketches, sitcoms, essays, films, and books. Master the joke form and you've got a solid foundation for writing all types of humor.

The single most important element of comedy is surprise. Every joke must have a punchline. That's the surprise. That's what prompts the laughter. Comics and comedy writers must remember that if you don't prompt the laughter, you probably won't get laughter. You must tell the audience when to laugh. It's too important to leave to their discretion.

Jokes also have an economy to them—an economy of words. Shakespeare said, "Brevity is the soul of wit." It's usually beneficial in writing jokes to be concise. However, each joke must convey a certain amount of information. If you're going to tell an audience when to laugh, you have an obligation to tell them what they're laughing at. You have to supply enough data for them to get the joke. At the same time, though, you don't want to supply so much information that you dilute the gag or tip off the essential surprise.

Your jokes should also be clever. You want to bring uniqueness to your humor. You want to offer your audiences something they never thought of on their own. Either that or you want to present something they all know and recognize with different, offbeat phrasing. In other words, you want to avoid the obvious. Strive to say something different or say something ordinary in a different way.

Jokes are important to all forms of humor, so it's essential for aspiring humorists to teach themselves to write jokes. Some writers who are primarily interested in other forms of writing besides stand-up may be tempted to skip over these lessons. In a word, don't—for many reasons.

Joke writing is good training in observation. You have to see the humor around you before you can condense it into a powerful one-liner. That's a talent that is certainly required in crafting a story.

Joke writing develops a facility with words. The exact word and precise phrasing can often make or break a joke. Certainly an extensive and colorful vocabulary coupled with

scrupulously correct phrasing will benefit writers of all genres.

Also, even though they are the smallest unit of humor, jokes have a dramatic construction of their own. Each one tells its own tale. If you teach yourself to construct a joke well, you'll also gain experience in telling a story well.

Regardless of which type of comedy writing you aspire to, devote a generous amount of time to learning to write gags. Mark Twain wrote some pretty quotable quips. Oscar Wilde did, too. Both were accomplished writers.

Teach yourself to write one-liners. Do some of the practice exercises. It will pay dividends.

5

Learn What Good Comedy Is

Many years ago, when I was in high school, our class got word that a new kid was coming to our school. All of us were excited because this wasn't just an ordinary kid; this was a kid from Managua, Nicaragua. Just saying those two words was an adventure: "Managua, Nicaragua . . . Managua, Nicaragua." The anticipation was electric.

The rumor around the school was that this guy was a pretty good athlete. That was important to fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds who would rather chase a ball around the playground than do practically anything else, especially study.

Our new classmate, when he arrived, was no disappointment. He was friendly and outgoing and did look like a solid athlete. He was a good student, too, but none of us really cared about that. He arrived during basketball season so we were eager to get him into one of our pickup games to see just how good an athlete he was.

He may have been friendly, outgoing, well built, and a good student, but he was one terrible basketball player. He dribbled the ball like a third-grader. His attempts at shooting the basketball were laughable. Defense wasn't his forte, either. Most of us could drive around him for an easy basket just about anytime we wanted. Besides all that, this guy didn't understand the game of basketball. He was familiar with neither the strategy of the game nor the basic rules.

We endured playing with him rather than enjoyed it. However, we did wonder how he got the reputation as an athlete. Judging from his basketball skills, we concluded that he was not gifted in sports.

However, once the game ended, we saw a different side of our new classmate. He performed a virtual juggling act with the basketball. Through some sort of maneuver that the rest of us couldn't quite figure out, he could pick a ball up off the ground using only his feet. Somehow or another the ball would jump into the air and fly up behind him and over his shoulder. From there he would keep it bouncing up and down using his knees, his feet, and even his head. The ball would stay aloft for as long as he wanted it to stay aloft. Every so often he would "catch" the ball on the back of his neck and balance it there. Then he'd let

it fall and once again kick it into the air.

His wizardry fascinated the rest of us, and we were eager to try some of the maneuvers he could do. We couldn't. We kicked it one, two, or three times, but then we lost control. He seemed to have athletic ability that none of us had.

On the other hand, most of us could dribble the basketball easily. Most could dribble the ball behind the back or through the legs. But our new classmate was happy if he could bounce the basketball three times without losing control of it.

What was the difference? Our new classmate was raised in a country where soccer was the most popular sport. He watched it as a youngster. He played it growing up. He practiced the maneuvers incessantly. Soccer was not a well-known sport in America then. Most of us high schoolers had never seen a soccer game. We didn't know the purpose of the sport, the rules, or any of the ball-handling skills associated with it.

The point of this story as it relates to teaching yourself to write comedy is that much learning is accomplished by absorption. We accumulate knowledge or skills by being around whatever it is we want to learn. This youngster from Nicaragua was magical with a soccer ball. Some of us in the States were fairly proficient with a basketball.

We American youngsters watched and played the typical American sports—football, baseball, and basketball. None of us, at least in those days, ever took lessons from a pro. We didn't go to baseball or basketball camps. We watched the games and somehow we acquired the skills necessary to play those games well, or at least competently.

Our new classmate probably never had any formal soccer training. He absorbed knowledge of that game and a mastery of many of the maneuvers used in it by being familiar with it. Some knowledge we acquire almost by osmosis. We needn't study, memorize, or read textbooks. We simply absorb it. For instance, children learn to speak in coherent sentences without studying vocabulary or syntax or grammatical rules. They learn to speak because they're around people who speak. It's a genuine learning process, but it doesn't require any formal study.

People who work in a hospital—even nonmedical people—soon learn the meaning of abbreviations that are associated with medicine such as stat, qid, tid, cath, and EEG. People who work with lawyers soon acquire fluent “legalese.” We acquire much knowledge through nothing more than association.

One aspect of teaching yourself to write good comedy is to surround yourself with good comedy. Be aware of it. Make it available to you and make yourself

available to it. That will be your first assignment in teaching yourself to write comedy.

Here are a few steps you can take to familiarize yourself with comedy and begin to absorb some of the fundamentals without consciously studying the craft:

Watch and listen to as many comics as you can—live, on tape, and on television: A wealth of comedy is available to anyone at any place. Your local comedy clubs feature some promising young comics and some raw beginners. Try to catch those acts. Analyze their material. What are they talking about in their sets? What sort of gags do they use? What's unique about their delivery? Did they score with the audience or no? If yes, why? If no, why? Do the same with up-and-coming comedians who are often featured on cable channels.

It's a good idea to formalize your thoughts on these comics. Write a simple review of the act. Note the good points and the bad. Recall some of the great routines and jokes and also list some of the areas that could use more work. You don't have to craft a complicated and well-written review of their act. It's just a way of assuring yourself that you really watched and learned from this specific comic.

In this process, you will see some excellent performers and some that are sadly lacking. That's OK. You can learn from the good and the bad. There are things you should do and things you shouldn't do as an aspiring comedy writer. Often in watching the lackluster performers, you'll learn much about what you shouldn't do. That's still learning.

Watching some of these performers may inspire you to write a few comedy lines for them. You may be able to put a joke or two in where needed. If you do, don't hesitate to try to get this new material to comics. Send it to them, or if you have an occasion to chat with them, offer your material. Comics live or die by their material. It's their lifeblood. If they get an opportunity to see material, they'll usually take it. It's good practice for you to write to a specific performer. It can be part of your learning routine. There's also a possibility that it can lead to good career moves.

I got a big boost in my fledgling career many years ago when a friend interviewed Phyllis Diller for a newspaper article. This journalist mentioned my writing to Phyllis. She told him to have me send some samples to her. She bought the samples and asked me to write more. From that beginning, she purchased comedy material from me regularly. When she began a network variety show, she asked that I write the opening monologues. I did, and the

following year I was offered a staff position on a top-rated Hollywood variety show. That was the beginning of a long writing career. It all began by sending a few samples to a comedian.

Video also offers samples of many comedians' work, from both current comics and past legends. All of *The Dean Martin Celebrity Roasts*, which feature brilliant one-liners from all sorts of celebrities, are available on DVD. You can watch and enjoy concert performers such as Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Robin Williams, Stephen Wright, Phyllis Diller, and countless others. These are all solid, well-honed performances by comedy greats. Watch any of them and you have to gain an appreciation for and worthwhile knowledge of top-level humor.

Read about successful comedians: Phyllis Diller wrote a wonderful book about her comedy career titled *Like a Lampshade in a Whorehouse*. Phyllis, of course, learned much about the comedy craft and business as her career progressed. In the book she talks about what she learned, when she learned, and how she learned. Anyone reading the book can learn along with her.

Steve Martin wrote a volume about his career progression, too. It's called *Born Standing Up: A Comic's Life*. Martin analyzed comedy as his career blossomed and made some courageous decisions about the type of material he would use and his own performing style. Readers can use his evaluations to influence their own comedy decisions.

There are many other books by and about great comedy performers. By reading them, you absorb a great deal of information about the business of comedy performing and the turning points that enabled a comic to break out of the pack—to go from stardom to superstardom.

Familiarize yourself with legendary comedy performers of the past: There are fantastically funny and talented performers in comedy today. And there are plenty of up-and-comers who will slide into superstardom and eventually become the legends of tomorrow. Comedy is not suffering from a lack of supply. Yet it is not trivializing the work of the newer comics to appreciate and learn from past greats.

Keep two things in mind about past legends. First, they were not always legends. Some may be tempted to say, "Oh, sure, so-and-so can get away with things that newer comics can't because he's so-and-so. People laugh at him just because he's famous." That may be true, but why and how did so-and-so become famous? He wasn't born that way. It wasn't something he inherited. He became famous because he was good. He performed well and audiences enjoyed his humor. He earned his greatness.

Second, legendary status is achieved usually through longevity. So-and-so gained fame and maintained that status for a long time.

Those two accomplishments alone are worth reflection. There is something to be learned by achieving star status and then keeping it. However, there is another reason for associating with stars of yesteryear—what they can offer you today, or maybe tomorrow. The routines the legends performed obviously worked. Granted, some are dated and out of sync with today's market. Nevertheless, there is the chance that some of those outmoded routines may have a kernel of comedy in them that can be revitalized, refurbished, dusted off, and republished as current, chic, cutting-edge comedy. It's worth a look.

Communicate with people in the comedy world: Write or e-mail people who are successful in the profession you want to explore. A friend of mine used to boast that the best come-on line for meeting people of the opposite sex was "Hello." It's a conversation starter. It's the beginning of a dialogue. It may not always work, but it is a legitimate effort. Likewise, making contact with another writer can often be the start of a worthwhile conversation.

Your letters needn't be asking for advice or favors or introductions or anything at all for that matter. They can merely be like my friend's "Hello." You make contact, you introduce yourself, and you go wherever the communication leads you.

I know people who have written letters to accomplished writers and received pleasant replies, and that first contact opened up years of back-and-forth communication and friendship. You may just write a letter to a comic telling him or her how much you enjoyed the performance.

This story is not about a letter, but it does show how much performers appreciate a compliment. I was once working with an established star on a variety show. For whatever reason this actor wasn't happy working on this show. It was my chore as head writer to bring script changes to his dressing room. He didn't receive me or the changes warmly. I just wanted to get them delivered and get out of there. However, this celebrity had a new show on the air at this time that I thought was delightfully written and brilliantly performed. I wanted to tell him that before I rushed out. So I worked up the courage to deliver my compliment.

His attitude changed immediately. He received my compliment graciously and said, "You don't have to rush off, do you? Sit and have a drink with me." We talked for quite a while about his show.

Sincere compliments are a great icebreaker.

You may be asking, "How do I contact these people? Where do I write?"

That's up to your ingenuity and, in fact, is part of your learning process. When you build up material or product that you want to get to the marketplace, you're going to have to do even more research. This is a little experience in that process.

Understand that you may never receive a response. No one is obligated to answer unsolicited mail. However, there is a chance that it may open a correspondence with someone in the comedy world.

What can you learn from this contact? Who knows? The point of these actions is that you put yourself in a position where you can *absorb* knowledge.

All of these activities are rather passive. All you're really doing is associating with people in comedy and hopefully learning something in the process. The exercise we're going to suggest now requires more active participation. But it will be beneficial as you continue with your self-education.

What you must do now is to begin collecting some great comedy lines or jokes. Not just a few. Fifty good gags should be your minimum. And these shouldn't be "OK" lines; they should be excellent comedy gems. They should be lines that you honestly consider superb, top of the line, brilliant. Record them as you gather them and keep them for future reference. You'll see a little later in this chapter how they will help.

You can gather these lines from your memory. You may recall having heard a line years ago that has stayed with you. You don't even have to know who said it, or where you heard it. If it's an outstanding line in your opinion, add it to your collection. Some comedian (I don't know who) did a line on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (that'll give you an idea how long ago it was). During his routine he said:

We used to play a game when I was a kid called Spin the Bottle. A girl would spin the bottle, and if it pointed to you, the girl could either kiss you or give you a nickel. When I was thirteen, I owned my own home.

So search your memory and try to recall a couple of boffo lines that impressed you. Jot them down.

You can gather lines by listening to current comics. If one line strikes you as brilliant, put it in your list of fifty.

Do some active research. Watch videotapes of comics and extract some of the best gags. Listen to comedy recordings. Read collections of one-liners. Any book of Henny Youngman or Rodney Dangerfield lines will have some amazingly funny gags in it.

Don't be bashful, either. Include some lines that you've written—if they

genuinely qualify. I have a few of these among my favorites. One I wrote for Phyllis Diller about how cheap her husband, Fang, was:

Fang took our entire family out for donuts the other day. The children were delighted. They had never donated blood before.

Another one kidded a friend about a mythical, wacky aunt:

I had one aunt who thought she was the Goodyear blimp. Sure, it sounds crazy to you, but she got to see a lot of football games for free.

I like those jokes; I put them in my collection.

Gather these jokes any way you can. Just be sure that you honestly think they are superior lines and that you collect at least fifty.

This is not a one- or two-hour, or even a one- or two-day project. You can continue your search for weeks or even months if you like. Here are a few of the benefits of gathering these one-liners:

You're learning what good comedy is: Again, by this process of absorption, you're training yourself to recognize excellent comedy. You build up an enthusiasm for it and a desire to replicate it. You've heard and read outstanding lines; now you want to write some. And again, by absorption you begin to develop a facility for creating funny lines. How it happens, I don't know. Nevertheless, you'll discover that it does happen.

I worked with Bob Hope for almost thirty years and met and worked with many writers on his staff. It was interesting to note that most of the writers would somehow or another adopt his mannerisms, his inflections, his figures of speech. None of those writers consciously decided to imitate Bob Hope; we just did (I include myself). Of course, this helped our writing. Whatever we wrote was in his style, his wording, and specifically for his delivery.

You become aware of different styles of comedy: In doing your research you cover a wide range of humor, and you notice that different comics work differently. Jerry Seinfeld is funny, but it's definitely a different kind of funny from Ray Romano. Kathy Griffin has funny material. So does Roseanne Barr. They're different from one another.

By becoming acquainted with the many different techniques, you broaden your comedy range. You teach yourself that you can expand your own comedy horizons.

You learn which comedy styles you prefer: Bill Cosby uses the routines

he uses onstage because that's the type of comedy he prefers. Louis CK prefers his own very different brand of humor. As a writer, you will be more adept at certain types of comedy writing, probably because you have a preference for that style. As you look at the gags you select for your top fifty you will begin to notice a pattern. That should help you define the comedy writing that you prefer.

Your list will provide inspiration and encouragement for your own comedy writing: These are great lines you've collected. Reading just a few of them will prompt you to want to write your own great lines. Many performers have told stories of how they went to see a show or a movie or a comedy performance, and that one experience led them into show business. It planted a desire that they followed relentlessly until they reached their goal. Rereading your list can give you that same inspirational boost.

Your list can also help you overcome writer's block: You're stuck for a topic or a funny slant on a given topic. You're stymied. Reading over these lines could be just what you need to break out of those "there's nothing funny about this" doldrums.

Referring back to the Bob Hope writing staff, we would often be stuck for ideas. Some would put in tapes of past Hope monologues and get into the rhythm and the flow of the comedy by watching a few minutes of it.

Another device we would often use would be to call another writer on the staff and admit that we couldn't get started on a certain topic. That writer would then read a few of his or her better lines, and that would convince us that there was something funny about the topic. Often that would be all we would need to turn out a usable routine.

Your list will provide a comparison for your own writing: You've selected fifty wonderfully funny and professional lines. You're also teaching yourself to write wonderfully funny and professional lines. By comparing your writing with your list, you can grade your progress. Is your writing as good as the lines you selected?

Remember, though, that you've spent a great deal of time choosing only brilliant material. Not every line you write will be as outstanding as the lines on your list. Nevertheless, some of your material should begin to replicate the quality of these lines. That's the goal you're shooting for.

Your list provides a series of joke forms that you can utilize in writing new jokes: Jokes have a form to them. By reviewing your list of great jokes, you should see many different forms. There are jokes that reverse logic.

For instance:

He's so rich that when he writes a check, the bank bounces.

She's so ugly, when she runs into a mouse in the kitchen, the mouse gets on a chair.

There are an almost limitless number of joke forms (and later in your self-teaching you'll make a concerted effort to find and duplicate many of them). Several forms should be present in your list of fifty. If you're stuck for a joke, you can often read through your collection and decide on a joke form that you want to replicate. Then you plug in the new elements and thus create a new joke based on an old form.

Exercises

Here are a few exercises you can do with your list of gags.

1. Analyze them. Go through your list, just a few at a time, and explain the gags to yourself. What's funny about this specific joke? What about it amused you? You needn't go into great detail; just give it a brief once-over. In the process you should pick up some good pointers on how to make a joke funny.
2. Try to improve them. This can be a challenge because you're starting with an admittedly brilliant gag. Nevertheless, pick a few from your list and play with them. Use the same premise, but try to improve the joke. Change the words in the setup. Change the words in the punchline. Add new words. Subtract words. Understand that you may never make the joke any better, but you can educate yourself through the process of trying. For instance, take this joke:

He's so old, when he was a boy, the Dead Sea was only sick.

Now some variations (again, not necessarily better; just different):

He's so old, when he was a boy, the Dead Sea was still alive.

He's so old, when he was a boy, the Dead Sea hadn't even been born yet.

3. Try to "top" them. Select a few gags from your list and try to write better jokes than they are. With this exercise, you're not just changing a few words or the arrangement of words; you're trying to write an entirely new joke that does a better job than the one you've chosen. As an example, let's use the joke from above and do some new jokes that are

based on it but quite different:

He's so old, he doesn't study history, he recalls it.

He's so old, he has a world globe in his living room that he had when he was a boy. It's perfectly flat.

OK, you get the idea. Have fun with these.

6

Learn to Be Good by Not Being Bad

Some humorist once said that a bachelor is a man who never makes the same mistake once. It's kind of a snide remark against marriage, but like all good gags it contains wisdom. Experience is learning from your own mistakes. Isn't it wiser, though, to let others make the mistakes and learn from them?

There are plenty of "not-so-good" comedians out there. That's not a slam against today's comedy or the younger comics and writers. It simply recognizes the reality that it takes some time for comics and comedy writers to find their *voice*. They have to learn what they shouldn't do as they are learning what they should do.

I generally tell young writers that the audition pieces they write don't have to be superb, but they should be flawless. There's a difference. Superb writing is excellent, superior, outstanding, magnificent, grand, splendid, and a whole bunch of other over-the-top adjectives. Flawless writing, on the other hand, is free of errors. Some writers may rebel. "It's much better to be excellent, superior, outstanding, magnificent, grand, splendid, and a whole bunch of other over-the-top adjectives than it is to be simply free of mistakes." It may seem that way, but in the real world, it's often not.

As a producer, my first day of a new season began with stacks and stacks of spec scripts waiting for me as I entered the office. Most producers will read through these stacks because with a fresh season comes the demand for new ideas, new stories. Competent writers are needed to fill the empty pages of the upcoming shows. However, most producers read only until they spot a defect. Once they catch it, they discard that script and that writer. In other words, they read that script only until they can find an excuse to stop reading it.

Unfortunately, some superb writing gets tossed into the "reject" heap because it had a flaw in it. That flaw may have been an old joke, a tired premise, a contrived plot point, or whatever. Flawless writing, however, increases the chances that your script will receive a full reading (and if a producer gets through your script without tossing it aside, a sale or at least a pitch session usually results). But superb writing is only read up to the first defect.

Of course, the ideal is to be brilliant and flawless, but we're getting ahead of our learning schedule.

As writers, we can learn from the bad comics as well as the superior ones. We can see the flaws, the failings, and the defects, and, like the bachelor who opened this chapter, we can learn not to make the same mistakes once. As the chapter heading says, we can learn to be good by not being bad.

Comedian Henny Youngman had a very simple but funny line. He told about going to his doctor, raising his arm, and saying, "Doc, it hurts when I do this." The doc said, "Don't do that." Likewise, if you complain, "Anytime I try to write or tell jokes, I bomb." I could simply say, "Well, don't bomb."

Realizing that Henny Youngman's gag was just that, a gag, wouldn't it have made more sense if the physician had said, "Let's try to find out why it hurts when you raise your arm." Certainly, that would have been more logical (but less of a gag). Obviously, there was a medical reason for the pain whenever the arm was lifted. There's also a reason, or more probably many reasons, why a comic fails to get laughs. Your task as a student of comedy is to uncover those reasons. Once you uncover them, you can legitimately say, "Don't do that."

As we said in the opening of this chapter, it's better and certainly less painful to learn from other comics' mistakes. You do want to learn from the brilliant comics, and that's what this book proposes. However, you can also learn from the not-so-good ones, and that's what this specific chapter is about.

How do you learn from those comics you see on TV or in your local clubs who are not yet polished? You learn by watching, analyzing, and studying their performances. But what exactly are you looking for? Basically, you're searching for the "Why." As in Henny Youngman's joke, the doctor should have done tests to discover "Why" the arm hurt when it was raised. As a student of comedy, find out why certain acts are only mediocre.

Overall performance: First, consider the overall performance. Some comics lose the audience as soon as they step up to the microphone. The first gag flops and the performance goes downhill from there. Other comedians begin strong and somewhere along the way lose the crowd's favor. A few comedians have moments of brilliance but don't sustain them. There's a reason for all of these variations. Try to discover what it is.

Using Henny Youngman's doctor's logic once again, a comic may say, "I started out weak and never got any better." The solution: "Then don't do that."

Another may tell you, "I was going strong there for a while and then

suddenly I lost the audience.” The solution: “Then don’t do that.”

Still another may say, “I had moments of comedic brilliance, but overall the act was terrible.” The solution: “Then don’t do that.”

I’m purposely making this sound silly, but valuable lessons are attached to it.

An awkward start can influence the rest of the comic’s act. Because the beginning is critical, make sure that your writing can get the comic off to a good start. Do not dismiss the opening of your routine in order to get to your “good stuff.” You have to lead into your good stuff with other good stuff. If you don’t, as you’ve seen from studying some comics, then none of the good stuff will be appreciated.

If you note that a comic was doing well and then suddenly lost it, you must note where and why he or she lost it. What did the comic do or say that turned the crowd response around? Often an inappropriate joke or topic can backfire. As a writer, be aware of that and avoid those jokes or topics. Again, in the words of the good doctor: “Don’t do that.”

The other comic’s problem was that he or she was brilliant at times but lackluster at other times. As a student of comedy, you learn to focus on the brilliant moments and eliminate the weaker moments. The late Johnny Carson used to kid, when he had a joke that didn’t deliver as much laughter as it should have, that comedy has peaks and valleys. And it does. Not all of the gags in a routine can be equally funny. Even if that were possible, it would be monotonous. You need stronger gags throughout a routine. But you can’t allow the valleys to detract from the peaks. You can’t permit them to destroy an otherwise powerful routine.

In working on sitcoms, we would have many writers meetings while the show was in production. After the first table reading, we’d meet. Several times during rehearsal, we’d meet. Even after we taped the first show, we’d meet before taping the second show. Mostly what we were trying to do was to make the show better. Yes, we’d add stronger jokes if we could, but primarily we were spotting and eliminating weaker moments—the same that you should learn to do when writing stand-up material.

Beginnings and endings: Note also the beginnings and the endings, not only of the entire performance but also of the various segments within the presentation. How long does it take the performer to let audiences know that he or she is a comedian? Of course, they know it from the billing at the theater and the artist’s reputation, but how long does it take the performer to tell them? In other words, how long does it take before audiences know when to laugh?

It takes some comics quite awhile to make that point. Many begin with “Are you folks having a good time?” “Are you enjoying the show?” “Where are you from?” and other such time killers. These niceties produce no laughs. It’s not until that first laugh that we know that’s a comedian onstage.

Phyllis Diller told me once that was the reason for her wacky costumes. She wanted to get right to the laughs. Her costumes were so bizarre that audience members laughed as soon as they saw them. Phyllis took one step onstage and the audience was laughing. What better beginning could there be for a comic?

Then Phyllis would use the costume as a straight line. She would do a joke about her outfit. Another laugh. That’s a solid beginning.

Dean Martin, although he was a vocalist, had a great, entertaining opening. He would be announced from a backstage microphone, the orchestra would play his theme, he’d walk out with a cigarette in one hand and a drink in the other. He’d acknowledge the applause. When the applause began to fade, he’d walk over to his piano player, lean on the piano, and say to his colleague, “How long have I been on?” Big laugh; great opening.

As a writer, you should learn the importance of getting the audience laughing as quickly as possible.

There’s a show business axiom: Always leave them laughing. The ending of the performance is important, too. Some comics will simply say, “That’s my time, folks.” That’s not leaving them laughing. As a comedy writer, you should learn that it pays to finish strong. Have the audience laughing as you exit the stage.

That also applies to pieces within the routine. Earlier we spoke of the peaks and valleys of comedy, and they do exist. The quality of the comedy content will go up and down. It should. However, each piece should have at least one peak in it. Often, if you analyze weaker comics, you’ll notice that they can begin a new topic and then suddenly dismiss it and move on to the next topic. The audience wonders where the big laugh in that segment was. And if there was none, why did the comic bring the subject up in the first place? As a stand-up writer, learn that each comedy bit must have a peak somewhere among the valleys.

Material: Of course, a major part of any stand-up comedy performance has to be the material. If the jokes aren’t there, the laughs won’t be there. I remember once being in a meeting with Bob Hope and four high-ranking members of the military, one from each branch of the service. Several of us writers were going over a script before taping. One of the generals asked for a change in the script. Bob Hope agreed and said to his writers, “Give me a

pencil.” None of us had any sort of writing instrument. Hope turned to his distinguished guests and said, “Do you believe it? I’m the only comedian in the world who hires writers who don’t carry pencils.”

I mention this because every profession has certain tools associated with it. Writers should have something to write with. For comedians, the tools are the jokes. That’s what they use to get the audience to laugh. So any comic who walks onstage should come equipped with some laugh-producing material—solid jokes.

Analyze the material of any comic you watch. In general, is it strong enough, or is it lacking? If it’s weak, why is it weak? How might it be better? What would you do to make it better?

Delivery: An actor who performed on a sitcom that I wrote for once asked me, “Which is more important to the show—the comedy you guys write or the performance of the actors?” I responded honestly: “Our lines mean nothing until someone speaks them, until some actor breathes life into the comedy.” In any presentation, the result is a blending of material and performance. Solid material can be destroyed by a drab performance; superb acting skills often can’t overcome mediocre material.

Once my partner and I were auditioning talent for a show we were producing. Two performers came to the audition without material. Prepared for just such an occurrence, we had a short sketch that we had written earlier for *The Carol Burnett Show*. It was a two-person piece that Carol Burnett and Harvey Korman had performed. It had played very well in front of the studio audience and on the broadcast. It was a good sketch.

At the audition the two actors performed it and it died. It just didn’t get any response from either the small audience or the crew members who were there. Then one of the actors stood and pronounced, “No one could get laughs with crap like this.”

Since my partner and I had written “that crap,” and since we were the ones who were doing the hiring, these two didn’t get hired. But it does illustrate that sometimes the fault lies with the performance rather than with the words on the pages.

Your job in studying random comics is to separate the two. If the fault lies with the delivery, find out why. Does the comic’s performance lack strength, confidence? Does the comic take charge of the audience?

Once I went with a comic I was working for to see Liberace perform. Liberace, of course, was primarily a musician, but his act was comedic. I must

confess that I wasn't a fan of Liberace's at the time. I really had only seen him playing piano on television. I'd never seen him perform in a theater. I would rather not have gone, but the comic asked me to go with him because he wanted me to watch the opening act with him.

I learned that night that Liberace was a master showman. The way he controlled an audience was astounding. When he began to talk to his audience, which was about two thousand people, I got the feeling that he had tossed a large lasso over the entire crowd. Then slowly he tightened the loop. Bit by bit he pulled that audience in, converting many of the nonbelievers like me. It was a great lesson in orchestrating an audience.

Does the comic vary the delivery of the lines so that there is some variety in the presentation, or are all the punchlines delivered in a similar cadence? This can make the routine monotonous. Is the comic energetic?

To cut to the chase, you're trying to discover if this comic's delivery is hurting otherwise excellent material.

A question you may be asking is: If the material and the delivery are so intertwined as to be almost inseparable, how can you tell which is at fault? Well, that's part of your training. You have to look at a performance and teach yourself to evaluate comedy on the page. Is that particular joke getting the response that it should get? If it's not, the fault is probably with the delivery.

One time, I wrote a joke for a well-known boxer of the day to deliver in an on-camera chat with Bob Hope. At rehearsals, the line never worked. Hope called me and wanted it changed. I, like all writers, defended the line. I said, "Bob, you can't expect a big laugh when the line is delivered by a punch-drunk boxer who can hardly be understood." Hope said, "Gene, no one in the world could get a laugh with that line." In that instance, the fault apparently was with the material.

It's good practice for you to try to separate the two elements when studying these comics.

Relationship with the audience: Stand-up comedy is a very intimate form of entertainment. A person comes out and talks to you. The rapport between the audience and the comedian is paramount. Years ago, I remember a friend telling me that he didn't think Jackie Gleason was funny. I asked why not? He said, "He's too loud." How the audience perceives a performer can affect the effectiveness of the humor.

Of course, this relationship is difficult to tie down. Don Rickles comes onstage and attacks; his good friend Bob Newhart does just the opposite. Both are

brilliant, and each has his share of fans. Although it's hard to tie down an approach to the audience, it will serve your educational purposes to note whether a comic is being accepted or rejected by the listeners. Try to find the "Why" in either instance.

The comic should also display an awareness of the audience and its reactions. One thing that can often hurt a performance is to blame the audience. Comics should realize that if a joke fails, it's the comic's fault; it's not the listeners' fault. Be wary of comics who attack and alienate an audience.

Also, does the comic's material apply to this audience? Is it appropriate? Is it what this audience understands? Is it what the audience wants to hear? Good material can become bad material if it's aimed at the wrong crowd.

Routining: Does the comic's act have a natural flow to it? Are the topics the comedian discusses in the right order? I once worked with a great comic who was having some trouble with a specific performance. Whenever he delivered the material at rehearsals, he got minimal laughs. In less polite words, he was bombing. Then right before the actual concert, he met with the writers and rearranged all the segments of the routine. "Let's start with this, then go to this . . ." and so on.

His performance that night was magnificent.

We changed no jokes. All we did was change their position in the performance.

Consistency: A good joke is a good joke. However, a good joke can become a not-so-good joke when it contradicts another good joke that went before it in a routine. If a comic paints his father as a dummy in the first part of his routine, it can confuse the audience if he later refers to him as his hero. If your brother-in-law is lazy in the beginning of your act, he'd better be lazy throughout. Even if you have a wonderful joke about what a workaholic he is, you may have to drop it.

Some comics may have trouble with their act because it's inconsistent. Whatever point of view they have should be maintained throughout the performance.

Stage presence: Recall some of the legendary entertainers—Elvis, Sinatra, Judy Garland, whomever you most admire. When they were onstage, they looked like they belonged onstage, center stage, in the spotlight. They stood there with power, strength, confidence. That's what you'd like to see in any comic you watch.

Are they commanding the attention of the audience? Are they demanding the respect of the audience? Do they own that stage?

I realize that as an aspiring writer, you can't "write" this sort of stage presence into your scripts, but you can be aware of it as part of your learning experience. This attitude is part of comedy; you should at least note it.

Persistence: As a young humorist, I once prevailed on a sound engineer to tape one of my presentations for a possible comedy album. He went to great lengths to record not only me but also the audience reactions with strategically placed microphones. The only problem was that there was no audience reaction. In short, I bombed.

Afterward, I asked this gentleman if he would record another appearance I had scheduled. I assured him it would be a better audience. He said, "I don't ever want to do anything with you again." He didn't say it bitterly, just matter-of-factly. Of course, I was taken aback. I asked him why? He said, "You gave up. You surrendered. The jokes weren't working, so you quit." He was right, of course.

However, he had more to teach me. He said, "Good entertainers, when things are going badly, will work harder to get the audience back. You didn't, but you should have."

Look for perseverance, and courage, in the comics you're analyzing. Often, a performer can recapture an audience even after a bad start—but only if they work at it. As a writer, often you can improve your material—but only if you work at it.

Compare the weaker comic to the stronger one: Our purpose in this chapter and with these exercises is to observe, analyze, and study random comics. The percentages dictate that a few of them will be less than stellar. Our purpose is not to belittle them but to learn from them. One facet of learning is to compare them to the better comics, the more experienced, the more skillful. Note the differences. Why is one better than the other? What can one do to graduate to the more polished area?

These things that you notice can help you become a better humorist.

As the parent of a troublesome child once noted, "He's not a bad boy. He's a good boy who does bad things." The comics you study at this phase are not "bad" comics. They're potentially good or outstanding comics who may be inexperienced and still in the learning process. They're good comics who may still be doing a few bad things.

As a student of humor, you can analyze their errors and eliminate them from your humor. You're learning from others' mistakes. To refer back to the title of this chapter: You're learning to be good by not being bad.

7

Selecting Your Mentor

In the previous chapter we discussed being good by not being bad. That's a valuable show business concept that's often hidden from public view. For instance, I noticed when working with a certain performer that people would say to me, "Boy, he is versatile. He can do anything." In my own head, I would respond, "No, he can't."

I knew from the meetings we had, the rehearsals we watched, and the changes we had to make to the scripts that this particular entertainer could not do anything and everything. He had limitations. They all do. We all do.

But then how did he appear so flawless, so skilled in everything he did? It's simple— everything he did he did well because he did only those things that he could do well. That's intelligent showmanship.

Let me use another example from sports. Wilt Chamberlain was a seven foot one basketball player who dominated the NBA when he first entered the league. No one in the league had ever averaged more than thirty points a game for a season. Chamberlain scored over that in his first season and continued to average more than thirty points per game for the next seven seasons. In fact, in one of those years, he had a per-game average of over fifty points.

Some people criticized him because all of his points were around the goal. "He can't shoot from outside," they'd say. But if a person can score that many points near the basket, why would he go away from the basket and not score as much?

Frank Sinatra sang his style of songs magnificently. But he rarely came onstage and sang an aria from *La Bohème*. Why would he? Why should he? Liberace played the piano superbly. Should he be criticized because he couldn't play the tuba?

All performers want to register well with their audiences, and they do that best by doing what they do best. It behooves you as an aspiring comedy writer to discover what you do best and base your career on that. For that reason, it's a good idea to select a mentor for your comedy writing. Ideally, you would select one person whom you can study, analyze, and emulate.

By having a mentor you now have a voice for the comedy you write. Stand-up comedy is a combination of good material delivered by a talented comic. Jokes on paper are lifeless. They take on power by the person who delivers the lines. So as you write good comedy lines, you should hear the delivery of those lines in your head. If you've selected a mentor, you can "hear" that person deliver your lines. It will add impact to your writing.

It will also promote consistency in your comedy writing. Different comics deliver lines differently. I've written material for a number of comics over the years, and I've learned that joke ideas have to be phrased to suit the comedian. So if you're writing to a vacuum, that phrasing can vary. Having one comic in mind allows you to write to his or her style.

As you study one comic's style and delivery, you're learning solid comedy principles. Certainly, you'll select someone who has achieved some success in stand-up comedy. Therefore, whatever this comedian is doing or has done, it worked.

I play golf badly. However, so do most of the people I play with. But I always chuckle to myself when one of my playing partners will hit a terrible shot. Then I'll step up and hit a shot that's almost as bad or maybe worse. Then the guy who hit the terrible shot before me will tell me what I'm doing wrong. No, I want someone who can do it right to instruct me.

A good mentor will help you to develop good technique as a comedy writer.

Also, as we said earlier, it is important for performers to do what they do best. It's important for you, an aspiring writer, to write what you write best. A mentor allows you to focus on a particular style of humor. Your interest in learning is maintained if you can focus on a particular style rather than be distracted by trying to learn many different types. It's easier for you to find your comedy writer's voice if you are being guided by a definite comedic voice—that of your mentor.

Some may rebel, saying that this is limiting. Why concentrate on one style of writing when you could be much more versatile studying varying styles? Sure, having a large range of skills is desirable. It's commendable. Remember, though, that this is a learning process. There is a certain inertia to be overcome as a student. By focusing on one particular style, you speed up the learning curve. Once you become proficient in one area, you can more easily branch out into others.

I laugh when I read some instruction manuals for aspiring musicians. In books about learning to play guitar, for instance, several pages in the front are devoted

to correct posture and proper hand positions. Then I watch renowned, well-regarded popular guitarists and some of them almost seem to be slouching in the chair as they play magnificent solos. Why aren't they sitting up straight with their seat backs in the full, upright, and locked position? They've studied and mastered the fundamentals, now they can take some liberties with them.

As a writer, you should devote your full attention to basics. Later you can play with them, violate some of the rules if you like, and try different genres. That will all be open to you once you've mastered the fundamentals. And all of your experiments will come easier to you if you're well grounded in the basic skills.

Having a definite mentor is an essential element in this self-teaching program. It's so important to the learning process that your first real assignment is to devote careful consideration to the way *you* need to learn. You need a mentor, but not just *any* mentor—you need a mentor who is appropriate for your desires and skills,. That requires some due diligence.

Select someone whose comedy you enjoy: Make no mistake about this—learning to write comedy can be a daunting task. In fact, the profession of comedy writing is not all fun and laughs. One of my TV writing colleagues once said during a particularly stressful, late-night rewrite session, “When did my career suddenly become a job?” It can be a difficult learning process. You make the entire curriculum lighter and more enjoyable if you're writing the type of material that you enjoy.

Enthusiasm is a major factor not only in learning to write but in writing. If you enjoy what you're doing, chances are you'll do it better. In any case, it'll seem less troublesome. Liking what you do generates passion, and that passion often translates into more productivity and more effective results.

Spend some time and effort searching for a comic to write for whom you genuinely enjoy. As your career grows, you may not always have a choice. You write for who pays you, or maybe who pays you the most. At this self-teaching stage, though, you can select any comic you like. Take advantage of it.

Select someone whom you could actually write for: As we mentioned earlier, we all have limitations. Performers do and writers do. There may be comedians whom you would have trouble writing for at this stage of your experience. Common sense dictates that they would not be appropriate mentors. It would be futile and frustrating to spend much of your learning time trying to write for someone whom you can't realistically write for.

Certainly, your self-teaching sessions should be challenging. If you don't put a demand on your skills, you won't learn anything. However, you shouldn't put such a demand on your talents that it inhibits or frustrates the learning process.

Perhaps as your writing skills grow, you will be able to write more easily for this particular comic. That's not only possible but probable. However, at this learning stage, it would be more advantageous to select someone who suits your present requirements.

Select someone who is accessible: The whole purpose of this exercise is to watch, study, analyze, and learn from a particular comic's performances. Therefore, you must be able to watch or listen to this comic's routines. Being accessible doesn't mean that you should be able to talk to or communicate with your mentor. If that's possible, it's a plus. However, if it's not realistic, you still should have access to your mentor's appearances.

Current, up-to-date appearances are preferred, but they're not absolutely essential. For instance, many of Bob Newhart's routines are still available on his early recordings. They were well written and based on solid comedic principles, so they can be valuable. Bill Cosby recordings are available, entertaining, and beneficial to a writer who prefers that style.

When I began, I admired Will Rogers's clever commentary. However, Rogers died before I was born. Nevertheless, much of his material had been assembled into books, and his lines were readily available to me.

Many performers' routines can be viewed on YouTube or DVDs. Here, you get not only the material but also the "live" delivery. You can actually watch your mentor deliver the lines and work the audience.

Several performers also have books available. I don't know how many books Henny Youngman has published, but I do know that if you want to learn about the one-liner, any book featuring Youngman's material is beneficial. Jeff Foxworthy has several volumes of "You might be a redneck if . . ." lines on the shelves, too. Fun reading and great educational value for an aspiring gag writer.

However, comedy can change slightly over time. Are Will Rogers's quotes as pertinent today as they were in the thirties? Maybe Cosby's and Newhart's early recordings are somehow dated. We did say earlier that there is value in studying performers of the past. It worked then, it might work now. Or perhaps a variation of what they did will work now.

Nevertheless, there is an advantage to studying a performer who is current. The material doesn't have to be topical, but the act should be up to date. As a student, you can see how the comic adjusts to different topics and even

audiences. Besides, you'll have much more material to study. Material from any comic who is no longer performing is necessarily limited. There are only so many recordings or DVDs of past performers.

In contrast, I selected Bob Hope as my stand-up comedy mentor. At that time, Hope was doing TV specials fairly regularly, opening each show with ten to twelve minutes of up-to-date lines. When he hosted the Academy Awards, he would always present a current monologue. He appeared often on talk shows and other variety shows. I had a steady supply of new one-liners to analyze and try to replicate.

That sort of supply is invaluable in your training.

Select someone who has value as a mentor: You're beginning this adventure because you want to learn something. Therefore, the guide you select should be able to teach you what you want to learn. Some fascinating and entertaining performers are available, but not all of them have value as role models. For instance, I mentioned Frank Sinatra earlier. He was a consummate performer, a sparkling personality in dealing with an audience, and obviously a scintillating, polished vocalist. He was a stunning example of showmanship, but none of that would help me become a comedy writer.

Not all good comedians are good mentors, either. I mentioned that I studied Bob Hope and his comedy style. I wanted to learn to write comedy. I wanted to know how to put jokes on paper. Hope's material, I felt, looked good on paper. Of course, Hope's delivery was flawless and added to the power of his material. Nevertheless, even reading some of his quips in the newspaper or in *Reader's Digest*, the gags still were potent. This was a mentor who served my purposes.

Yet one of the greatest acts I ever saw in my life was Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. It was fresh, it was surprising, it was entertaining, it was funny. Of course, Jerry Lewis was the funny one. Dean Martin looked good and sang beautifully, but at that time, he was really Jerry's straight man.

But Jerry's antics, as entertaining and hilarious as they were, weren't what I needed in a mentor. Why? Because they were primarily "Jerry's antics." Very little was quotable in Martin and Lewis's act. It was all wackiness, goofiness, and wonderfully zany comedy, but not on paper. I wanted to write on paper.

Now don't misunderstand. Some aspiring writers may want to write the exact type of comedy that Dean and Jerry were performing. Then, yes, by all means make them your mentors.

This brings up a question that we should discuss: Is it wise to have more than one

mentor? There are different styles of comedy. Rita Rudner is hilarious, so is Ellen DeGeneres. They're different styles, though. Jerry Seinfeld is a wonderful stand-up comic, so is Stephen Wright. Again, different styles. As I've already said, I admired Bob Hope and I roared at Martin and Lewis—styles that couldn't be more different.

Since there are so many different forms of stand-up comedy, wouldn't it be wise to study several different guides and learn to write for all of them? It may be and it may not be. It's pretty much up to the individual comedy writing student.

Having several comics to emulate and studying their different techniques may help you to get a broader education in stand-up comedy. You're learning different styles. You may also discover ways to take some comedy concepts you create and apply them, with different wording, to different styles of comedy or different comedians.

We admitted earlier, though, that learning comedy is not necessarily an easy chore. A joke I heard many years ago poked fun at some early advertisements. It went, "Learn how to dance in ten easy lessons . . . or three really hard ones." Well, sometimes learning to write comedy can feel like the "three really hard ones."

Each style you try to learn requires effort, time, and dedication. With each mentor you select, you'll have to do research. Each one requires a commitment on your part. Are you willing to put in that sort of time and effort? Or are you better served by concentrating on one mentor now and learning the techniques of another mentor after you've mastered those of first one?

That's entirely your decision.

8

What and How You Should Learn from Your Mentor

Now that you've carefully selected a mentor, you can begin the process of learning from that performer. (In the previous chapter, you had the option of choosing one mentor or several. However, I'll refer to your mentor in the singular, which is simpler to write than "your mentor or mentors.") This chapter covers topics such as style of comedy, attitude, language, and delivery, among others, and how comedians deal with them.

Style of comedy: Comedy has many styles. For instance, there's the classic setup-punchline technique used by many legendary performers such as Bob Hope, Henny Youngman, and Phyllis Diller. This style is very concise. The comic says a straight line and follows it immediately with the gag line. There's very little variation in it. Often the only difference is in the topics the comics discuss. Hope would generally talk about current affairs. Youngman went with gags about his brother-in-law or his wife. His signature line, in fact, was "Take my wife—please." Phyllis Diller would do lines about her husband, Fang, and her mother-in-law, Moby Dick. Phyllis would kid about her own unattractiveness and the problems of being a housewife and mother. Nevertheless, they all used the setup-punchline format.

George Carlin was an observational comic. He noted that "anyone who drove faster than us was a maniac while anyone who drove slower than us was an idiot." He wondered why we "drive on parkways and park on driveways." He saw the ironies and the inconsistencies in life and commented on them in a funny but more conversational style. Bill Cosby is similar except that he concentrates more on his childhood and his life as a father and husband.

Jerry Lewis, Jonathan Winters, and Robin Williams illustrated a more wacky comedy style. Those comics are zany and unpredictable. Many times it's not what they say but the goofy way they say it or act it out that produces the laugh.

There were comedians who got their laughs by destroying the English language. Professor Irwin Corey and Norm Crosby are examples. There was also

a gentleman by the name of Al Kelly who spoke meaningless double-talk so believably well that people in the audience thought they understood him.

There are almost as many styles of comedy as there are comedians. Your first task as a student is to learn what type of comedy your mentor uses.

Delivery: Again, there are countless variations—even within the different styles. For example, earlier we mentioned that Bob Hope and Phyllis Diller utilize the setup–punchline style almost exclusively. The style is similar, but the delivery is quite different. Rita Rudner also uses a similar comedy style, but her delivery is markedly different from Phyllis Diller’s.

I sometimes use the example of going out as a group to see two nightclub acts. We’re going to see Rita Rudner perform and then stop by and see Kathy Griffin perform. It sounds like our group will have a wonderfully enjoyable evening.

We won’t!

Why? Because we will take Rita Rudner’s material and ask Kathy Griffin to deliver it. And we will take Kathy Griffin’s act and have Rita Rudner perform that.

The evening will be disastrous. Both of them have wonderfully funny material and both are polished performers—but only when they are delivering their own material. The material is part of the act, and the delivery dictates the material.

As a student, you must develop an ear for your mentor’s delivery and write to that.

Some may ask, “Isn’t that limiting to study one specific comedy delivery?” Yes, it is, but at this stage of your writing career you are concentrating on learning to write well. If you study this one style and master it, you are writing professional-quality material. And with effort and time, you’ll learn to do it quite well. Once you master a single style, it’s easier to develop your “ear” to learn other comics’ styles and deliveries. You’ll become a versatile writer much quicker that way.

Comedy rhythm: Pacing is an important part of a comic’s act. Some comedians work quickly. Bob Hope earned the nickname “Rapid Robert” because of the quickness with which he worked and how many punchlines he could cram into a short amount of stage time. Jack Benny, on the other hand, worked slowly.

Some comics prefer to extend their setups and then deliver a punch that pays

off solidly. Others like to hit, score, and move on. Even some gags that don't score are forgiven because the audience is intent on moving on quickly to the next punchline.

Of course, the comedy rhythm affects the way you write your material. Study and analyze how your mentor works and train yourself to write to it.

Overall approach to comedy material: What sort of comedy does your mentor utilize? Many comics prefer intelligent humor—gags that make you think. Others find wonderful success with hokey but effective material. There are those who even favor puns. All of the various approaches can work provided they get laughs. Your task at this stage of your comedy education is to find out which approach your mentor favors and deliver it.

Attitude: Lewis Black shouts out most of his punchlines in frustration and anger. His observations annoy him, and he lets his audience know about it. Ron White is a comic who comments on many topics but doesn't seem to be too bothered by any of them. He just seems to be laidback, willing to take things as they come. Different comics have different reactions to their own material. That attitude affects their acts and the writing of material for their acts. It's a facet of your mentor that you want to note, analyze, and study.

Approach to the audience: Stand-up comedy consists of a comic, comedy material, and one other important element—the audience. The relationship between the performer and the audience is part of the entertainer's act. Paula Poundstone, for example, converses with her audiences. She welcomes them into her act and often generates some of her biggest laughs through that dialogue. Kathy Griffin invites audiences into her inner sanctum. She wants to “share the dirt” with them. Even though she doesn't converse with them as much as Paula Poundstone does, she makes them an integral part of her performance. Other comics like Ellen DeGeneres and Kathleen Madigan rarely have any discourse with the folks in the audience, except to tell them their funny gags.

The jokes you're going to create for your mentor should reflect his or her approach to the audience.

Language: The late Rodney Dangerfield's signature line was “I don't get no respect.” Grammatically incorrect but comedically effective. Dangerfield used street dialect. He didn't fret over grammar and syntax; he just told his jokes. Other comics are more precise in their language. Some comics today use profanity as a colorful part of their presentation. Other comics don't.

Your mentor will have a speech pattern that is distinctive. It's your task to

learn it and utilize it effectively.

Range of topics: If you watch the late night talk show hosts, you'll quickly discover that they talk about current topics. They discuss politics, sports, or show business; in short, they'll comment on anything that is being mentioned on the news. Bob Hope's monologues usually centered on the current events, also. Other comics comment on more general topics. Some don't like current events because the "shelf life" is too short. They want gags that will last longer.

Your mentor will favor certain topics over others. In fact, there may be areas that the comic you're studying will not touch on at all. If you are going to try to write for that specific comedian, you should learn the range of topics that he or she will discuss.

Joke formulas: Most comedians will utilize some joke formulas in their act. A joke formula is a specific joke structure that supports many different topics. There are a limitless number of them. Just as illustrations, a few are listed here. We'll discuss more examples in chapter 12.

"I won't say he's (blank) but" formula: *"I won't say he's cheap but he not only has the first dollar he ever made, but also the arm of the man that handed it to him."* *"I won't say he's old, but his baby picture is carved on a cave wall."*

Comparison formula: *"He's about as useless as a screen door on a submarine."* *"He's about as useless as a two-legged stool."*

Negative comparison formula: *"He is to acting what Grandma Moses was to skydiving."* *"He is to comedy writing what Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was to graffiti."*

There are hundreds of such formulas. You've heard them often, and you'll hear them again. Certain comics tend to favor certain ones. If you pay attention to your mentor, you'll discover those that he or she favors. You can use them in writing to that style.

Which types of jokes are most effective: Johnny Carson used to kid on *The Tonight Show* about the "peaks and valleys of comedy." He would usually call on this to explain why one of his one-liners got a less than uproarious response. But there really are peaks and valleys of comedy. In any comedian's routine there will be big laughs, there will be little laughs, there will be chuckles, and there will be silence.

George Burns used to kid about that when people asked if he was a humorist or a comedian. He said, "If I get big laughs, I'm a comedian. If I get little laughs,

I'm a humorist. If I get no laughs, I'm a singer."

The peaks-and-valleys idea makes sense because no routine can have the same level of laughter throughout. You need certain small laughs to set up the big laughs. Also, if the laugh level was always the same, it would become monotonous.

So there will always be big laughs and little laughs. Nevertheless, the goal is to get mostly big laughs. One person I worked with in sitcoms would always come to us writers after the first reading and say, "Get me boffo lines." She wanted all big laughs.

In learning comedy, try to discover which lines do get the boffo laughs. With determined observation and some research, you should be able to tell which types of lines generate the biggest laughs for the comic you've selected to learn from. Once you discover the secret, you can then create bigger laughs by writing to that style. Here are some procedures that you can follow to help you learn from your mentor:

Assimilate by association: This first learning procedure is quite passive. Woody Allen once said that "eighty percent of success is showing up." That's about the extent of your participation in this first learning experience—showing up, being there. In fact, the less you do in this procedure, the more you'll benefit. The idea is to associate with your mentor in as many ways and as much as possible.

Watch as many of your mentor's performances as you can. Try to catch your mentor's appearances on talk shows. If there are books, magazine, or newspaper articles about your selected comedian, read them.

Do all of this with no thought other than to observe and listen. Much of our learning is accomplished by absorption. Remember in chapter 5 I talked about the new student in our school who came from Nicaragua. We thought he was a wizard when he did soccer ball juggling with a basketball, yet most of us had more basketball skills than he had. He watched soccer as a youngster; we all had watched the traditional American sports—basketball, baseball, and football. Simply by watching, we developed our dexterity in those activities; by watching, he developed his talents in soccer.

By associating with the performances of a talented, successful, accomplished professional comedian, you will absorb comedy awareness. It's that simple.

Gather a collection of favorite jokes: This next learning activity requires more participation on your part, mostly research. You should gather some of the

best examples of your mentor's comedy. You can recall these quotes from your memory, by listening to or watching his or her performances, or by reading excerpts from his or her act. Gather as many as you can, but be sure to accumulate at least twenty-five of them.

Be meticulous, too. Don't just jot down the first twenty-five you run across. Spend some time and effort to assemble the absolute best examples of your mentor's humor.

Jot these quotes down in no particular order and save them for referencing. You may use these later on in some of the writing exercises you do.

Study and analyze these lines. They will help you to learn many of the items that we discussed in the first part of this chapter—your mentor's style of comedy, overall approach to comedy material, use of formula jokes, and so on. This collection of lines should give you a thumbnail picture of your mentor's comedy and will serve you well as you continue to learn to write for your mentor.

As you read the lines over from time to time, you are seeing your mentor at his or her absolute best. You're seeing *excellence* in action. If you've researched the examples diligently, you're not only seeing the work of an outstanding professional humorist, but you're seeing the very finest work of that humorist.

These lines can serve as an inspiration for you as a writer. Here is a collection of lines that you felt were outstanding examples of humor. Simply reviewing them periodically can prompt you to work hard to duplicate them. I remember as a kid watching my older brother play high school football each Sunday of the season. Not only were the games fun to watch, but I would come home from them eager to change into play clothes, go outside with several buddies, and play two-hand touch football. The games were so exciting that they made me want to play, too. That's what these excellent lines can do for you -- inspire you to get writing.

The lines can also serve as an incentive. They are exemplary jokes—you purposely selected only extraordinary examples of your mentor's humor. They can prompt you now not only to write, but to write up to the quality of these gags. Reviewing these lines on occasion can goad you into working hard enough to produce lines that are outstanding. These examples should convince you that writing *good enough* is not good enough. You now want to write magnificent comedy.

With that in mind, this collection of material offers you a comparison, a measuring rod. Are the jokes you create on a par with these outstanding examples? Many times I've had aspiring writers ask me to read material and "tell

me if the jokes are funny or not.” We’re all looking for a way to guarantee the quality of our humor. My contention is that we all know what is funny. You obviously knew what was funny when you selected these gags as outstanding examples of “funny.” Now you can utilize them to measure the “funniness” of your work.

Create new material for your mentor: This last learning technique should be an ongoing one. Apply it at every opportunity. It is the centerpiece of your curriculum in learning from your mentor.

Video- or audiotape your mentor’s monologue. Type it out so you have a paper copy. Now study and analyze that material. How does the comic open the presentation? What sort of jokes does he or she utilize? What topics were covered? How many gags per topic? How did the comic transition from one topic to another? Which formula jokes, if any, were used? And so on. Try to learn as much as you can about the context and content of the material.

Now put it in a drawer or set it aside. Forget about it.

A week or two later, select new topics that you feel your mentor might incorporate into a monologue. Using what you learned from studying the taped monologue, write a new routine for your comic.

It’s not necessary to strictly parallel each joke or to use the exact same form in the exact same spot in the routine. What you want to do is try to use what you’ve learned from the previous taped performance to write a new one that is suitable for your mentor. In effect, you are now writing material for your selected comic to use. He or she may never see it (although if your writing gets good enough, maybe you should send it to your mentor), but you are gaining knowledge about comedy and experience in writing for a well-established professional.

As I said earlier, repeat this exercise as often as you can. It’s that important to your training.

I know from personal experience that this training can work. Many years ago I used these procedures to learn comedy writing from the comedian I selected as my mentor. It worked well and landed me a job in television.

After I had been in Hollywood for only a few months, I got a call from a comedian asking me to write some audition material for a show he was about to do. The call was from my mentor—Bob Hope.

I wrote lots of material, and he used a good portion of it when he emceed that year’s Academy Awards broadcast.

The next day he called and said, “You know, it looks like you’ve been writing for me all your life.”

I said, “Mr. Hope, I have—only you didn’t know about it.”

I continued to work for him for almost thirty years until he retired from performing.

It works.

9

What Do You Write About?

If someone asks you to write a joke, the first question you should ask in response is “What about?” A joke has to be about *something*. You can’t write a joke about *nothing*. Think of any joke you’ve ever heard. It’s about something, right?

A colleague of mine, who wrote for *The Tonight Show* when Johnny Carson was the host, told me that joke writing was a relatively easy part of the job. The difficult task was coming up with new topics to write about night after night.

The first chore for any gag writer is to decide what to write about. This requires considerable dedication because it is an important part of comedy. Often, the creativity and uniqueness of the topic can add to the impact of the gags. Mother-in-law jokes can indeed be funny, but if a comic can surprise an audience with ideas they’ve never heard before or never heard expressed in such a creative way, the gags will be that much more effective.

Where do you begin to look for topics?

Since you’ve already selected a mentor and may be trying to write material that blends in with his or her style, you should turn to that mentor for inspiration. Though we discussed this in the previous chapter when you were studying your mentor’s comedy techniques, it’s worth mentioning here as it relates to finding topics.

Listen to your mentor: Review those premises that your mentor already includes in the act. List them. Study and analyze them. These will serve you in two ways. First, you have topics that your mentor has already accepted so you can write jokes that fit in with his or her present routines. It seems reasonable that if your mentor is doing gags about eating healthy foods, then you should create a few healthy food jokes that could fit right in. Of course, in your studies you would also note your comic’s point of view on the subject. Does your mentor enjoy healthy food, or is it problematic? Your material should reflect that same attitude.

Second, you could create topics that are somehow related to the premises

your mentor is already doing. They would be new topics but within the framework of the material this comic is already discussing. For example, if the comic you're studying does several routines about eating healthy foods, that may prompt you to work on related topics: exercise, working out at the gym, losing weight, being health conscious, enjoying or not enjoying sushi, and so on. You want to be as creative in selecting topics as you are in writing the individual one-liners.

Listen to other comics: Whatever comedy they're doing is about something. As we said up front, you can't do jokes about nothing. Other comics may be talking about subjects that would fit right in with the type of material you're writing for your comedian. Listening to them may supply you with a whole new repertoire of topics your mentor could use.

Also, listening to a variety of comedians will present you with *trends in comedy*. What are comics talking about today? What premises are hot? Even if you don't apply these premises to your mentor's act, it's still helpful to know what topics are current.

We mentioned earlier that it's a good practice to do comedy writing exercises. Not all of these exercises must be related to the specific comic you've chosen to study. As you hear other comedians doing routines on varying premises, you could write new material on them. There's always room for new jokes on any premise. As an example, I often cite Jeff Foxworthy's hilarious routine "You might be a redneck if..." It began with a few one-liners in Foxworthy's act. Now he has written several books on that premise that contain hundreds, maybe even thousands, of beautifully humorous gags, like the following:

You might be a redneck if you think you have a set of matched luggage if you have two shopping bags from the same store.

You might be a redneck if you think the last words to the national anthem are "Gentlemen, start your engines."

You might be a redneck if you've been married three times and you still have the same in-laws.

Comedian Red Buttons was famous for his "never got a dinner" lines that he would do at banquets. Buttons would wonder why this Guest of Honor received a dinner when other famous people "never got a dinner." Here are a few samples:

Moses, who said to the Children of Israel, “Wear your galoshes. I’ve never done this trick before,” never got a dinner.

King Henry VIII, who said to his lawyer, “Forget the alimony. I’ve got a better idea,” never got a dinner.

Jack the Ripper’s mother, who said, “Jack, how come I never see you with the same girl twice?,” never got a dinner.

It would be good practice to try to create a few more “redneck” and “never got a dinner” lines. And if you hear repeating routines from other comics, try to write a few lines for those, too.

Listen to radio and TV: The big comedy names on TV, like Jon Stewart and Conan O’Brien, do gags on current events and up-to-date trends.

Non-comedy radio and television talk shows also discuss many interesting subjects. By paying attention, you’ll get political news, but you’ll also get sports, theater, human interest, and lots of unusual facts that may become premises for your humor.

Read magazines and newspapers: Other people know what’s happening in the world because they read these periodicals, too. Newspapers and magazines give you an overview of the hot topics making the rounds.

Scan the headlines to see the major stories in all areas. This not only provides you with topics for your humor, but it also helps keep your comedy references current.

Search through the material for those offbeat, obscure items that can also be fodder for your comedy. Remember, it helps to have unique premises and this is a wonderful way to uncover some.

Review your family history: Remember your crazy old Uncle Harold and his silly wife, Aunt Myrtle? Wouldn’t they make for some hilarious anecdotes for a comedy act? Even if Uncle Harold wasn’t as crazy as you remember him, you can still embellish those tales about him and make them hysterical. And the way you write about Aunt Myrtle can make her much sillier than she really was.

There are some oft-told family tales that could be a part of a comedy routine. They don’t have to be completely true. This is comedy, not history.

Ray Romano exaggerated some of his family’s foibles for his stand-up act and later turned those stories into a successful situation comedy.

Observe other people: Even if you insist that your family is completely

normal, you associate with other people who may be as wacky as Uncle Harold and Aunt Myrtle. There were some movie shorts years ago that popularized the saying “People are more fun than a barrel of monkeys.” They are. Or at least they could be when you get done exaggerating their idiosyncrasies. You can find much material by being aware of people, noticing their actions and reactions, and using even the slightest hint of zaniness as a springboard for your humor.

List your own shortcomings: Remember those people we said were more fun than a barrel of monkeys? Well, you’re one of them. Self-deprecation is a valuable comedy tool. Look at the mileage Dean Martin got out of being a drinker. When someone complimented him on his cuff links, he said, “Is that what they are? I thought they were curb feelers.” Phyllis Diller got big laughs making fun of her looks: “I put my bra on backwards and it fit.” Even Bob Hope who was an unabashedly boastful comedian would deftly use self-deprecating lines. In one exchange, a beautiful actress told him that she always laughed at him in the movies. He said, “Thank you, but you know I did some pretty romantic love scenes, too.” She said, “I was talking about the love scenes.”

The nice part about kidding yourself is that you run less risk of people getting angry at you. So long as you’re kidding yourself, Uncle Harold and Aunt Myrtle won’t be tempted to cut you out of the will.

So dig deep, be honest, be playful, and gather some material in which you’re the *victim*.

Focus on your pet peeves: Humor can be quite therapeutic. If a driver cuts you off on the highway, don’t lose your temper and chase after him at dangerous speeds. No, let him go and retaliate when you get home and sit before your keyboard. Write jokes that tell the whole world what an idiot this guy was. If your doctor keeps you waiting inordinately long even though you have a scheduled appointment, make that doctor the villain in your next comedy chunk. If someone jumps ahead of you in the supermarket line and you’re too stunned to say anything clever, use your comic creativity to vilify that person in your monologue.

Anger is a fantastic comedy inspiration. Think of those things that annoy you and write about them. You can kill two birds with one stone—your annoyance and writer’s block.

Divide your thinking into places: When you’re looking for subjects to write about, use the advice that people give for finding profitable real estate—location, location, location. Search for inspiration in the kitchen. What activities

take place there? Which of those activities have comic value? Neil Simon had a line in his play *The Odd Couple*, describing snacks that came out of Oscar Madison's refrigerator. One actor said something like if it's black, it's cheese; if it's green, it's meat.

Look for possible material in other areas of your house—the den, the TV room, the bedroom, the bathroom. Something happens in all of them that may trigger a hysterical routine.

Of course, you're not limited to your own house. How about doing some wacky material about the dilapidated hotel you stayed in during your recent motor trip. Surely something funny happened during your trip to Italy or France. Remember that sightseeing tour you took in Sedona, Arizona, where the tour guide kept pointing out rock formations that you could never quite see?

Find the fun in the many places you've been. Just like Uncle Harold and Aunt Myrtle, you can embellish and make the trips funnier than they actually were.

Divide your thinking into times: Another way to discover untapped comedy sources is to divide your normal day into segments. You can do it in segments of any size, but just for discussion here, let's say you begin with midnight and separate the day into a series of three-hour segments. Now focus on those specific segments and try to isolate certain activities within those time frames that might lead to comedy routines. Let's take midnight to 3 a.m. to start. You may say nothing happens during that time because you're asleep. OK, but when you sleep, you dream. Do a routine about dreaming or a funny dream you had. Also, when you sleep, you might talk in your sleep. That could lead to some hysterical consequences. Also, that may be the time when your spouse hears strange noises in the house that could be dangerous. You are the one who must respond. Avoiding that response could be a funny chunk of comedy.

Now let's jump to the 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. period. Maybe that's your waking time. How you manage to get out of bed when you don't want to could be hilarious when you tell it. It's breakfast time, too. Surely, you've had some comedic disasters in fixing your own breakfast.

With some effort, you can find activities in every part of the day that, with your comedic ingenuity, may be turned into funny routines.

You may also divide your thinking into different time segments. How about winter? It might be funny to tell your audience about your experiences trying to get your car moving when the wheels insisted on sliding on the ice. In summer, you may talk about trying to find a bathing suit that makes you look sexy enough

to go to the beach. You might even look back and think of some of the silly things you did in the eighties, the nineties, whatever.

Bill Cosby went all the way back to his childhood to create Fat Albert.

There's plenty of comedy material to be mined. Use your creativity and your ingenuity to uncover it and turn the raw material into comedy gems.

In fact, this is a perfect time for another writing exercise. In this one, you don't really have to do any writing (unless you want to or are *moved* to), but you are required to come up with some topics that you could write about.

1. Generate three potential topics from each of the following:
2. Jokes your mentor has already done
3. Jokes other comics are doing
4. Listening to radio and TV
5. Reading newspapers and magazines
6. Your own family history
7. Observing other people
8. Your own shortcomings or foibles
9. Pet peeves
10. Specific places
11. Specific times

As mentioned, you aren't required in this exercise to actually write any jokes, but then again, what harm could it do to try one or two on each of the topics you've generated. It's your choice.

In any case, have fun with this exercise.

10

Preparation and Research Are Part of Learning

You've already watched your mentor and many other comics. You've collected jokes that you feel are superior. One thing you should remember is that as you watch these comics and their appearances on various shows, you are watching the result of much careful thought and planning. Comedy should appear spontaneous. The gags should feel like they just popped into the head of the comic. That's part of the allure of humor.

A gentleman I worked for many years ago in engineering used to advise me that "Simplicity is the product of thought." A good, solid, simple design was the result of study, effort, and applied knowledge. I learned that this admonition applied equally as well to humor. Planning and thought produce the "spontaneity" that comedy requires.

Ironically, part of your comedy writing training is teaching yourself to write material that seems effortless by putting extra effort into creating the humor.

Research is an essential facet of writing effective comedy. I began my writing career by doing emceeing chores for the people I worked with in a large industrial plant. I wrote some "roast" material for a few close friends, but then folks asked me to do banquets for people in the plant whom I hardly knew. How could I write incisive, funny material for folks I knew nothing about?

The answer was research. I would talk to friends of the guest of honor. I'd contact his or her family and ask them questions. What did friends kid him about? What did he kid himself about? What were his hobbies? How did he spend his free time? I would gather any information that I could about the "roastee."

Certainly, all of this material wouldn't be used in the monologue, but it was better to have too much information than too little. Some of the material I gathered would open up great sources of comedy. Especially effective was material that applied directly to the person being roasted. Any material that applied specifically to that person would usually generate big laughs.

It was the research that opened up avenues for comedy.

There are some cautions in uncovering areas for humor. First, the material you get must be corroborated. The fact that a friend or a family member tells you something doesn't necessarily mean that your audience will recognize it as true. I would have to check out any information I got with other friends or family members. If they all agreed that it was truthful and recognizable, then I could begin to write comedy lines based on that information.

Second, you must satisfy yourself that any information you receive is harmless. Sometimes friends will tell you things that the guest of honor would rather not have discussed at a banquet. Again, ask several other friends or family members if they think the information you have collected is acceptable.

This same research process applies not only to "roastees" but to other situations as well. For example, I remember getting a call from Bob Hope on the day that George H. W. Bush announced that Dan Quayle would be his running mate in the upcoming election. Hope said, "Do some jokes about him." I had never heard of Dan Quayle. Nevertheless, my assignment was to hand in a bunch of gags about him later that day. There's no way to do material about someone who is completely unknown to you without doing research.

Suppose a client you're writing for is going to visit a foreign country and you get the same sort of request: "Do some jokes about Diego Garcia." When that call comes, you'll most likely have some research to do before you can sit at the keyboard and tap out funnies.

As a comedy writer, you will have to gather as much background as you can on the person, place, or thing that you're going to write about. Note some pertinent or unusual facts. These may become straight lines for some of your jokes. At least they're a starting point.

In the last chapter we said that the first question you should ask if someone wants you to write a joke is "What about?" You can't write a joke about *nothing*. Well, you also can't write funny lines about a topic that you know absolutely nothing about. Through your research you will now know *something* about your assignment. Now you can write gags.

The more you know about your topic, the better you can write about it. To illustrate my point, imagine that you have to write material for a comic who is doing a show in your hometown. That would most likely be relatively easy for you. You know the neighborhoods. You know the sports teams in the area. You're probably familiar with cross-town rivalries. You know the foods your hometown is noted for. You know the places of interest that out-of-towners

visit. You may have to do some investigating, but you've got a pretty good head start on your assignment.

On the other hand, suppose your comic requested material for a show he's doing in Bend, Oregon. (Readers who live in Bend, Oregon, will have to come up with a different example.) In order to come up with material that has local impact, you'll have to read up on that city.

So you begin looking things up on the Internet or picking up tour books to try to discover what's hot, what's current, and what's happening in Bend, Oregon.

You gather as many facts about your topic—person, place, or thing—as you can. List pertinent facts, and then when you begin the process of writing your material, you can add “captions” to these facts to form gags.

For example, let's say the comic is visiting Philadelphia. One fact is that Philly is where the Liberty Bell is located. It could lead to a line like:

Philadelphia is the home of the Liberty Bell, which is cracked. A lot of the famous people from Philadelphia have the same characteristic.

Philly is also famous for the cheese steak. That could generate this:

Philadelphia is famous for the Liberty Bell and the cheese steak. If you can't tell the difference, you've gone to one lousy sandwich shop.

I mentioned earlier that in gathering information about my colleagues in industry, some caveats applied. They apply here, too. The facts you gather should be ones that people would readily recognize. In the examples above, most people know that the Liberty Bell is located in Philadelphia and that the city is famous for its cheese steak sandwiches. Also, be sure your lines are relatively safe. Even if you do a brilliantly clever line, if the audience takes offense at it, you may lose that audience for the rest of the show.

Why not try a couple exercises right now?

Exercise A: Since we've already mentioned two geographical spots, why don't you do some research on Bend, Oregon; Diego Garcia; or both. Gather a few pertinent facts from your detective work, jot them down, and then try to attach a caption to them.

It would be good practice to come up with at least five possible lines for each topic that you try.

Exercise B: Select a friend or acquaintance and pretend that you're going to introduce him or her at an imaginary banquet that many of your mutual friends

will be attending. Gather as much information about this person as you can. You can do it from your own knowledge or you can casually ask friends of the honoree for some applicable facts.

Generate a humorous introduction that applies specifically to this person.

Exercise C: Imagine that you or your client is going to be the comedy entertainer on a two-week pleasure cruise. Find out through your research or by asking people who have been on cruises what sort of topics you can do comedy about.

Pick two or three areas and try to write a small chunk of material for each. Five or six gags on each would be fine.

Another facet of your preparation for writing comedy is discovering “references.” Most gags are two ideas that the humorist ties together in a funny, unique way. For instance, here’s a gag from Rodney Dangerfield:

I don’t get no respect. The time I got hurt, on the way to the hospital the ambulance stopped for gas.

The primary topic is that Dangerfield’s being rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. The reference is that they stopped for some trivial or unnecessary reason—in this case, for gas.

Another gag from Ross Shafer:

I had general anesthesia. That’s so weird. You go to sleep in one room, and then you wake up four hours later in a totally different room. Just like college.

The general topic is being under anesthesia; the reference is that it was not unlike some experiences he had during his college days. Here’s another line:

My husband’s biggest decision is whether he wants salt or pepper on his eggs in the morning. He’s too lazy to shake both.

The main topic here is that the husband is lazy. The reference is one example that shows how lazy he is.

Notice, they are all two ideas tied together by the comic.

Let’s take another look at the example from Rodney Dangerfield. Other references might have worked in this gag. For example:

I don’t get no respect. The time I got hurt, on the way to the hospital the paramedics stopped for coffee and donuts.

Or maybe:

. . . the paramedics stopped to buy a lottery ticket.
. . . the ambulance driver decided to take the scenic route.
. . . the ambulance driver asked me if I wouldn't mind driving for a while.
. . . the ambulance driver took a short cut— through the cemetery.

These are all different references for the same setup.

References are an essential part of writing jokes. The more you can gather, the bigger selection you'll have when you start designing your jokes. Therefore, in preparing to write your material, you should spend a little time first uncovering references.

The first step in this process is to decide on your topic and then randomly come up with items that may be related to that topic. The ideas don't have to be funny—yet. What you're doing is gathering ammunition for the joke writing to come.

For example, let's say you're going to write a routine about baseball. You may then come up with a list of possible references, such as:

Strike three, you're out . . . ball four . . . relief pitcher . . . home run . . . stealing second . . . hit and run play . . . batting average . . . Pride of the Yankees . . . slide . . . trades . . . you must be blind, Ump . . . wild pitch . . . passed ball . . . infield fly rule . . . good wood on the ball . . . minor leaguer . . . curve ball . . . fast ball . . . spitball . . . pine tar on the bat . . . Texas league single . . . two strikes against him . . . fair ball . . . foul ball . . . outta the park . . . the warning track . . . spring training.

Now when you're generating your lines, you have possible ammunition for your setups or your punchlines. For example:

You know, [name of a ball player] got beamed right in the head the other day. His manager said it's the most wood he's gotten on the ball all year.

Some fan attacked the umpire at the game the other day. They arrested him, but he got off scot-free. The umpire was too blind to pick him out the police lineup.

I was so bad when I played Little League. My father was my coach. He traded me to another family—for a son to be named later.

I recommend, too, that you take this preparation one step further. After generating your random list of references, you create an organized list also. List people, places, things, events, words, clichés, and phrases that are similar or

related to your main topic. Also make a list of the same elements that are related to your main topic by being *unrelated* to it. Sometimes things can be connected to your subject by being the opposite of it. For example, there's a joke that reads:

No problem has ever been solved by alcohol. But then, of course, milk doesn't do much for it, either.

"Milk" in this gag is related to alcohol by being different from it.

Research and preparation can be as important to the comedy writing process as the process itself. Take some time to master these techniques as you continue to teach yourself to write humor.

Let me share one personal tale to show how important research and preparation can be, although I must admit this was more luck than pluck.

We were returning home after a Bob Hope Christmas Tour of military bases. We were flying toward Lajes Air Force Base in the Azores where we were scheduled to perform that evening. However, the pilots of our C-141 warned us that heavy winds at Lajes might prevent us from landing.

Bob Hope came to me and said, "Do some wind jokes." Well, I didn't have to do much research on that. I knew what wind was. I wrote a bunch of wind jokes that could possibly open that evening's monologue.

Then we got word that we couldn't land at Lajes, so we turned around and headed to a military base in Rota, Spain. Hope came to my seat on the plane, tore up the wind jokes, and said, "Do some jokes about Rota, Spain."

I knew about wind, but I didn't know about Rota. We were on a plane somewhere over the Atlantic so it would be difficult to get to a library, and I had no access to the Internet at that time. How could I do incisive gags about a place I knew nothing about?

I turned to a serviceman who accompanied us on this jaunt and said, "Do you know anything about Rota, Spain?"

He said, "Yeah, I was stationed there for three years."

I said, "Have you got a couple of minutes to talk?"

I asked him as much as I could about the base there. What were the good points about being stationed there? What were the bad points? Were there good places to eat near the base? What were the spots that should be avoided? Who was the CO and what was he like? With this serviceman's input, I gathered considerable information about the base and assembled a list of references.

I did a pretty good-size routine about Rota, Spain, and handed it to Hope on

the plane. He selected several gags, had them put on cue cards, and opened his monologue with them that night. They played well.

After the show, Hope asked how I got so much information about the base so quickly. I told him the truth—that I was a comedy writing genius.

Teach Yourself to Write Routines

Consider the mentor you've selected as your client. More important, consider yourself an indispensable member of that comic's writing team. Appoint yourself not only the head writer but the *only* writer. You now make yourself responsible for this comedian's material. You create new and original chunks of comedy that suit his or her style. You also update and improve material this comic is already performing. Of course, realistically, you understand that your mentor may never see or appreciate any of the stuff you write, but that's irrelevant. You still get the education that this sort of dedication provides.

Now that you've accepted this responsibility, you should teach yourself to write routines. Let's define what both you and I should understand as a "routine." This is not a technical term. It's simply an agreement that we have.

A routine, for the purposes of this text, is a series of at least twenty-five to thirty-five gags on one topic. Less than that won't do. More than that may be too many, but it could lead to you writing a second routine that's related to the first. There's nothing wrong with that. As a comedy writer, you can never create too many gags to select from.

That sounds like quite a few jokes on just one topic, and it is. However, later in this chapter we'll discuss ways to make it easier for you to focus on one premise until you've generated twenty-five to thirty-five gags. For now, let's discuss why working in routines can be beneficial.

Routines allow the jokes to support one another: Comedy has a way of building. I'm sure you've experienced this phenomenon. You're at a party with several friends and someone says something that causes uproarious laughter—almost uncontrollable laughter. The hilarity is so infectious that it spreads quickly. Everyone laughs. Some may not even know what they're laughing at, but they laugh anyway. Whatever happened or was said was side-splittingly funny.

Now, however, another phenomenon occurs. Whatever—and I literally mean "whatever"—anyone says after that also becomes hysterically humorous. "Pass the salt, if you know what I mean" triggers more giggling. "I wouldn't do

that if I were you,” and people almost choke on their food from laughing. “Well, John certainly knows what he’s talking about,” and even more raucous laughter erupts.

These follow-up sayings mean nothing at all, yet they succeed in generating enormous belly laughs. Why? Because they are building on the original event, which probably was genuinely funny.

Well-timed comedy has a way of building in this way, and professional comics can capitalize on this. Consider the following series of gags:

My wife is a bad cook. Other families say prayers before meals. Our family says prayers before, during, and after meals.

In our house, for dessert we serve antidotes.

. . . to the survivors.

Notice that several punchlines follow one setup: “My wife is a bad cook.” The material flows from one punchline to the next. Since the setup isn’t needed each time, it makes the gags more compact. Generally, the shorter lines become more effective.

Routines allow the effectiveness of the gags to build: As we saw with the example of the party where the laughter grew more and more uncontrollable, laughter can sometimes borrow from the laughter that went before it. It’s almost like investing your money and allowing it to grow at compound interest. The money you make on your invested money generates even more money. Likewise, the laughter you create with one gag can flow over into the next gag, provided the sequence is right and the timing is correct.

Notice in the example above that the third line in the sequence is not a strong stand-alone joke: “. . . to the survivors.” Nevertheless, it should play well with audiences because they are laughing at the preceding gags and will borrow the laughter from those jokes to enhance their reaction to this one.

Consequently, you get more bang for the buck. In that routine is one strong one-liner—the one about praying before, during, and after meals. But you get two more laughs piggybacking on that one.

It should go without saying that the more laughs you can pack into your act, the stronger that act will be.

Routines make it easier to do shorter setups: Shakespeare may have unwittingly set the standard for stand-up comics when he said, “Brevity is the soul of wit.” That admonition is not always true, but it’s a pretty good rule of

thumb for stand-up comics and writers of stand-up material.

One reason is that the shorter the gags are, the more of them you can pack into your time onstage. If a comic can keep the audience laughing without rest the entire time he or she is onstage, the more that comic will be applauded, appreciated, and rehired.

The gags can be shorter because the setup is implied. The setup is stated once in the introductory gag, so it needn't be restated each time. That, by definition, makes the joke shorter. For example, if the second joke in the series above was converted to a stand-alone gag, it might read:

My wife is such a bad cook, that in our house, for dessert we serve antidotes.

It's a worthwhile joke on its own, but it feels more powerful when it rides on the back of the original gag, eliminating the need for the setup.

Another point worth noting is that jokes must convey a certain amount of information. They have to supply enough data so that the listeners can understand and appreciate the joke, but they still should listen to Shakespeare's advice: "Brevity is the soul of wit." Get to the punchline and get to the next joke. That's a good working schedule for a comic and a comedy writer.

Let me try to illustrate what I mean by this. Consider the following punchline:

The waiter brought me all the bread I could eat and a glass of meat.

That may sound funny and get a few chuckles, but it doesn't really make much sense. However, if I supply more information, it becomes a stronger gag. Like this:

*I took my date to an elegant French restaurant and ordered our meal in French.
The waiter brought me all the bread I could eat and a glass of meat.*

You can readily see that the information supplied in the setup helped the gag enormously. In fact, it was absolutely necessary to turn it into a stand-alone gag.

Routines also improve the quality of your work by leveraging the luxury of quantity: Don't misunderstand this suggestion. Quantity does not replace quality in writing humor. A few good jokes are preferred over a whole bunch of mediocre material. However, we are implying that you are more likely to find those few good jokes if you can generate a bevy of gags to select from.

When we advise you to write from twenty-five to thirty-five gags for a routine, that doesn't mean that you will end up with a chunk of material that

runs from twenty-five to thirty-five jokes long. Not at all. Not every gag you write is a gem. You'll have a few less than sparkling lines in there. You may even have a few downright clunkers. That's fine. That's not bad writing; it's smart writing.

You now have the luxury of selecting only the best gags to form your resulting routine. It's possible that you may finalize your routine with just eight jokes. But because you selected only your outstanding gags, those eight should be strong and blended together nicely to form a workable routine.

Consider, though, if you wrote only eight jokes to begin with. Then when you edit them down, you may wind up with only two usable gags. That's hardly enough for any comic to add to his or her performance.

It's important to remember that the client most likely will edit your submitted gags down to the absolute gems. If you do indeed hand in a routine of twenty-five to thirty-five acceptable gags, the client reading them can readily see that even with edits, there would still be enough to add to his or her stage time.

Routines are easier for the client to read: In trying to sell any kind of writing, you want to make the buyer's job as easy as possible. You lessen your chances of approval if you irritate the client with your manuscript. I've watched professional comics read through submissions from writers and set the pages aside, almost angrily, because the material was too difficult to wade through. Reading through the material became so bothersome that the comics abandoned it.

A well-constructed and organized routine should read like a conversation. The jokes flow from one to another, and the logic is consistent. A good routine establishes the premise well. It develops the gags based on that premise. The gags should build comedically. There should be a recognizable payoff for each section of the routine. Reading a good routine should be a delight rather than a chore.

This encourages a potential buyer to at least read your entire submission. If your entire submission gets read, it has a much better chance of selling.

Routines are easier for the client to visualize: Just to illustrate this point, let me offer you a good stand-alone gag.

My friend, Charlie, never rents a cart when he plays golf. Where he hits the ball, it's cheaper to take public transportation.

That's a fine one-liner that any comedian would be happy to have, yet at the same time it presents a problem. Where does it go in the comic's act? Does it fit in easily with material the comic is already doing? If it doesn't and the comedian wants to use it, he or she may have to generate a whole new segment that this

joke could fit into. Is it worth that much effort?

That's one problem with generating a series of individual, disjointed, stand-alone gags—they have no relation to one another. They may or may not fit into existing routines. It's difficult for a client reading them to see where they could be used in his or her present act.

However, a series of routined gags may be lifted intact, or even edited down, and still fit into a comic's performance. With a routine, the placement of the gags is already determined.

Another factor to consider refers back to the previous comments—a series of unrelated gags are often difficult to read. Each gag must be considered on its own merit. Many of them may be outstanding, but wading through them one at a time can be a turnoff.

Routines help the writer to avoid “quitting too soon”: In my experience this is one of the biggest faults of comedy writers—we quit too soon. We choose a topic, write five or six gags on it, and decide that's all the humor we can generate on that particular premise. That's skimming the surface.

If you force yourself to write twenty-five to thirty-five gags on a topic, you must look deeper into the subject. You must uncover obscure areas that you can mine for humor. By doing this, you get beyond the obvious. Once you bypass the obvious, you generate more incisive humor. You come up with ideas that others haven't yet found. That's the real value of a humorist—to expose concepts that were always present but no one else ever saw.

It may feel like an impossible chore to create so much humor on one topic. As I promised earlier, though, we'll soon discuss some tricks that you can utilize to help you extend the humor of any topic so that you can comfortably write twenty-five to thirty-five gags on it.

When I was learning to write stand-up comedy, I made it a nonnegotiable practice to write routines. I'll review those techniques with you, but first let me mention how beneficial this was to my writing career. Both of my most important clients—Phyllis Diller, who helped start my career, and Bob Hope, who kept me on his writing staff for almost thirty years—told me, after I had been writing for them for some time, that it was the fact that I turned in routines rather than individual jokes that attracted their attention.

Learning to write in an organized, well-constructed routine format is a big part of your training at this point.

One day my partner and I were writing something or another in our office at *The*

Carol Burnett Show when another writer excitedly rushed into our room.

“They’re sending everybody home,” he said.

We were somewhat alarmed and quite confused. “Why?” we said.

He answered, “There’s nothing more to do. All the sketch ideas have been written.”

He was putting us on, of course, but there often came times when each writing team was certain it would never come up with another new sketch idea again. Gag writers hit that same limit. Or, more correctly, they *think* they hit that limit. They work on a premise and say to themselves, and believe, that there is nothing else funny that can be said about this topic. It’s a real feeling but a wrong conclusion.

Probably you feel that way now about this idea of writing twenty-five to thirty-five jokes on one specific topic. It feels impossible. And normally when you get to about the fifth or sixth joke, you are convinced that it’s impossible. There is nothing more about this premise that is amusing.

Often, it’s the number that terrifies us. Most comedy writers I’ve known could easily compose five or six one-liners off the top of their heads if you tossed a concept at them. It’s not unusual that they would spit their jokes out quickly before someone else in the room beat them to it. And, more often than not, when someone did toss out a one-liner, several of the other writers would either add to it or “top” it.

So writing half a dozen lines on a given topic is not that much of a challenge for a comedy writer. So here’s one of the tricks I promised earlier in this chapter to deliver—*write five or six jokes five or six times*.

“What?” I can hear you saying through the pages. Let me explain the technique: Any topic that you select can be divided into various components. I call them subtopics. That’s the first step you take in writing a routine—separate your main topic into about five or six subtopics. Now instead of having the seemingly impossible task of writing twenty-five to thirty-five gags on one topic, you have the much simpler chore of writing five or six gags on one facet of that topic. Repeat that procedure for each subtopic and you effectively have written a routine. It’s all on one topic but various facets of that topic.

To illustrate, suppose you want to do a routine about heavy traffic. Here are a few examples of subtopics you can write about:

1. How many cars are on the road nowadays. (*There are so many cars on the road nowadays that it’s causing a serious problem—they may not have enough cell*

phones to go around.)

2. How closely the cars travel together. *(I passed two cars on the side of the road today. They had locked windshield wipers.)*
3. Why are all these people out driving? *(There's no such thing as a Sunday driver anymore. They're all Friday drivers still looking for a parking space.)*
4. How long my commute takes. *(It took me two and a half hours to drive home the other day. And that's just counting waking hours.)*
5. How dangerous it can be. *(My buddy always drives way over the speed limit. He wants to get home before all the accidents happen.)*
6. Still some drivers insist on changing lanes and speeding through heavy traffic. *(I was raised in Catholic schools. I make it a point never to drive faster than the speed of prayer.)*

You can divide any topic into a limitless number of subtopics. Those selections are completely up to your imagination.

Now that you've isolated the ideas, begin to construct jokes on the various subtopics. Try to generate at least five or six. Should you get inspired and produce more than that, go with that stroke of luck. You can always eliminate a subtopic, or use the surplus of gags to begin work on another routine related to the main topic.

Following the math, you should now have the required amount of material to form a routine. The next step is to arrange your jokes in a natural, logical, somewhat conversational flow. This sequence will be determined by the logical progression of the jokes and, in many cases, by the comedic value of the gags. You want the routine to make sense, certainly, but you also want the gags strategically placed to make the entire routine the most effective.

Once you've established the basic flow of the jokes, you may notice some holes are in the piece. In other words, there may be spots where essential information is missing. You have to supply that data either by adding to the setup or by creating a new joke to fit into the vacant spot.

Finally, you should design *transition* lines to help the routine flow seamlessly from one subtopic to the next. You can do this with exposition, but the ideal transitions are jokes that include elements from the adjoining subtopics.

To illustrate, suppose in the heavy traffic example I used that we wanted to blend the subtopics, from "How many cars are on the roads nowadays" to "How

closely the cars travel together.” That could be accomplished with a line such as this:

The road was filled with cars. They tell you when you’re moving at fifty miles an hour, you should have five car lengths between you and the car in front of you. Well, we were moving at zero miles an hour, which means my car should have been sitting in the passenger seat of the car in front of me—and it almost was.

With that transition line now, you can continue to do your jokes about “How closely the cars travel together.” You’ve moved from one concept to the next.

This technique will help you produce more material. It forces you to do a little more than you’re accustomed to doing. When you’re trying to build a career, that’s a good thing. It will also add some luster to your material. Your gags will read better and consequently be better. This is almost like the idea you hear coaches spouting about during sports competition: “We have to play like a team.” “It’s team play that wins championships.” Writing in routines is comparable to having your gags work as part of a well-organized team.

Find and Study Joke Formulas

There are “tricks of the trade” in almost every profession. Formula jokes can be considered one in the joke writing business. Formula jokes are just that—jokes that fit into a predetermined formula. These are gags that utilize the same structure with different references plugged into the setup, the punchline, or both.

Following are a bunch of formula jokes that I used to write for Phyllis Diller about her heavy-set mother-in-law whom she called “Moby Dick:”

When she wore a white dress, we would show movies on her.

When she wore a green dress, people would mistake her for Vermont.

She wore a gray bathing suit to the beach and marine biologists kept pushing her back into the ocean.

Once she wore a red, white, and blue dress, stood on the corner, and a man threw a letter into her mouth.

Once she wore a gray dress and an admiral boarded her.

You can see that by using the same structure, you can add different colors and different payoff lines.

Formula jokes are a benefit to the gag writer in many cases because they provide a head start on the joke. Since you already have a format for the gag, you simply add unique references to form a new gag. In certain parts of a routine where you feel a joke may be needed, you can turn to a formula to supply that joke.

Joke formulas are useful, but they can be counterproductive if they’re overused. Too many of them can make an act feel weak because the gags become predictable. Often, even if they’re not predictable, audience members feel as though they’ve heard the gags before. In other words, the formula itself can become tired. Formula jokes should be used sparingly.

Of course, there are always exceptions. Some comics have practically built careers around formula jokes. In chapter 9 I mentioned Jeff Foxworthy’s signature

“You might be a redneck if . . .” routines. Several books of these gags are sitting on the shelves now.

You might be a redneck if you go to the cousins’ picnic to pick up chicks.

You might be a redneck if your kids take a siphon hose to “Show and Tell.”

I also noted that Red Buttons did a series of formula jokes each time he spoke at a roast. He mentioned famous people along with what they said or did and commented that they “never had a dinner.”

Lucrezia Borgia, who said as she was preparing drinks, “Boys, name your poison,” never got a dinner.

Adam, who said to God, “I got more ribs. You got more broads?,” never got a dinner.

Even Rodney Dangerfield’s famous setup line, “I don’t get no respect,” could be considered a formula joke.

I don’t get no respect. I told my father I wanted to go ice-skating. He told me to wait till it gets warmer.

I don’t get no respect. I once had a hooker tell me she had a headache.

Following are a few other joke formulas along with a few examples:

Series of three: With this formula you list a series of three items to describe something or other. The third in the series is usually the punch.

My lazy brother-in-law has three speeds—slow, slower, and notify the pallbearers.

(When airplane hijackings first started making the news) There are three ways to travel now—first class, tourist, and prisoner.

There are three ways to pay for a tank of gas nowadays—cash, credit card, and with your firstborn child.

Turn a positive statement into a negative: This formula adds something onto a complimentary statement that can turn it into an uncomplimentary statement.

My brother-in-law eats like a bird—a vulture.

You look like a million bucks—all wrinkled and green.

These two guys get along like brothers—Cain and Abel.

So [blank] that: Those of us who still remember Johnny Carson's nightly monologues on *The Tonight Show* know that Carson used this formula so often that audience members became eager participants. Carson would say, "It's cold here in New York." The studio audience would shout out, "How cold is it?" Then Carson would respond with his "It's so cold that . . ." gag.

It's so cold in Washington that I saw a politician with his hand in his own pocket.

It's so cold here in Los Angeles that one guy tried to take a shower and stoned himself to death.

I left the blank in the description because this formula can work for many different adjectives. "It's so hot that . . .," "It's so rainy that . . .," "He's so dumb that . . ." They're all variations on the same formula.

Easy to recognize: This formula sets up a premise and then tells you how you can recognize the folks you're talking about.

There are a lot of good family men visiting here in Las Vegas. They're easy to recognize. They're the ones you see coming to the late shows with their nieces.

There are a lot of conventioners in town this weekend. They're easy to spot. They're the ones with the funny hats and the funnier-looking hookers.

When he was born, the doctor . . .: With this formula gag, you predict how a person will turn out by the way the doctor handled him at birth.

It's easy to tell he was going to be a football player. When he was born, the doctor didn't slap his bottom; he drop-kicked him sixty-four yards.

You could tell he was going to be an unlikable person. When he was born, the doctor slapped his father.

Initials: Here, you take a recognized set of initials and give them an entirely different, humorous meaning.

I go to see an MD. In his case, that stands for "Mediocre Doctor."

My dentist is a DDS. That stands for "Doctor of Dental Suffering."

I just paid my taxes. I don't know about you, but to me, IRS stands for "It Really Stinks."

“Cross with” jokes: This is a cross-pollination form of comedy. You combine two items with different characteristics to form one product that behaves in an unusual but funny way. Here are a few:

I crossed a mink with a gorilla. I got a fur coat, but the sleeves are too long.

I crossed a coffee bean with Viagra. If it's going to keep you up all night, you might as well have something to do.

I crossed an ordinary house mouse with an elephant. Know what I got? A letter of resignation from the cat.

“That's like” jokes: This formula compares two different ideas that have certain similar characteristics.

Alimony—that's like buying a horse for someone else to ride.

Politicians pass laws and then exempt themselves from them. That's like voting a town dry and then moving.

“And that was only” jokes: With this technique you describe something and then switch it to mean that you're really describing something else. These examples should explain the formula:

I took a college entrance exam the other day and I sweated over that thing for hours. And that was only when they asked me to spell my name.

I was driving in my car the other day and was called an imbecile, a maniac, a moron . . . and that was only by my wife who was in the car with me.

“But enough about . . .” jokes: This is pretty close to the formula above, except with a different phrasing. You describe something and then pretend you're describing something else.

In life there are times when things don't go the way we want, when we meet impossible hazards, when our best efforts go for naught. But enough about my golf game . . .

We will always have those people who want more than they deserve, who insist on taking more than their share, who lie and steal to get what they want. But enough about my agent . . .

Definition formula: This is a simple formula in which you literally define the item or idea you're talking about.

You all know what a gas station is—that's highway robbery with a convenience

store attached.

I got my wife a nice anniversary gift the other day. You know what an “anniversary gift” is—that’s a present you give your wife the day after your anniversary so she’ll start talking to you again.

Translation formula: In this formula, you offer a mythical translation for a place or an idea. Take a look:

Here we are in Branson, Missouri. Branson: That’s an Indian word meaning “I bet you thought a lot of these performers were dead, didn’t you?”

Welcome to Washington, DC. Washington: That’s an olde English word meaning “Are you here on business or did you just come to visit your money?”

These are just a few examples of formula jokes. There are hundreds more of them. You’re entitled to use any or all of them in writing your own original jokes.

In furthering your education, you should make it a project to *discover* some new ones. You do this by listening and reading. Note any place where you see repetitive formulas. Build them into a collection that you can refer to and use in your own writing. It should come in handy for those occasions when you’re stuck for a gag or need a joke in a hurry.

Every so often, for practice, turn to your list, pick out a formula, and write a few jokes based on it.

Do Comedy Writing Exercises

You're familiar with the sight of a boxer skipping rope. You've often seen tape of football players on the practice field running through automobile tires laid out in a pattern. We're accustomed to seeing these images and we readily accept them. Yet you will hardly ever see a boxer grab a jump rope and begin skipping while the fight is in progress. You'll never see a football player break through the defensive line, spring toward the goal line, but stop along the way to prance through an obstacle course of old tires. The question, then, is: If these are skills that are never used in competition, why practice them at all?

The answer is that these drills help the athlete develop attributes or skills that will eventually be useful during the skirmish. The heat of battle is not the ideal time to experiment with new techniques. The skills an athlete brings into the competition are ones that he or she perfected during practice. Professional golfers often advise amateurs not to try new techniques while playing eighteen holes. They suggest that on the course you think only about scoring or about your upcoming shot. You're to trust your swing and your talent while you're playing, but you develop the optimum swing and polish your technique with putting exercises, pitching drills, and swing repetition on the practice range.

Some of the practice drills are indeed similar to the playing techniques. For instance, a golfer hitting shots on the practice tee looks the same as a golfer hitting shots on the course. But other exercises look nothing like the actual competition. For instance, the boxer skipping rope looks nothing like the guy throwing devastating punches at his ring opponent. Both types of drills, though, are beneficial.

In teaching yourself to write comedy, you should utilize solid practice, drills, and exercises. Many of these will be similar to the sort of writing you would do for a client or for a show you're working on. It would be like writing jokes, just like the golfer on the practice range would be hitting shots he would hit on the course. Other exercises may be some-what removed from the normal comedy writing techniques. They would be equivalent to the boxer skipping rope or the football player high-stepping through tires. These writing exercises would be

developing skills related to your comedy writing chores. They may develop creativity in general or research habits. They may just promote a sense of humor.

Most writers suggest that there are only three ways to learn to write. They are to write, to write, and to write. It's important for all writers to write regularly. It's the easiest way to learn the profession and the quickest way to develop your distinctive writing voice.

It would be ideal if you as a writer had so many contracts that you were forced to write continually. Not too many of us have that luxury (or that headache, depending on your point of view). Of course, you can always write continually on speculative projects. You can spend a considerable amount of your writing day churning out novels, screenplays, sitcoms, sketches, or brilliant one-liners. That's commendable.

Nevertheless, it's still a good idea to devote some of your writing time to practice drills or exercises—even those that may seem a bit removed from actual comedy writing. Here are a few reasons why such practice will help with your self-education:

Writing exercises broaden the writer's approach to comedy: Most of us writers gravitate toward a certain style of humor. I know some people who are incurable punsters. They like that form of comedy, and it comes naturally to them. In fact, it becomes almost obsessive. Mention any word that has a double meaning and they will exploit it. Other writers I've known tend to the bizarre in their comedy lines. The images they paint are outrageous—funny but weird. Some writers prefer intelligent wit. They create clever lines like Noel Coward or Oscar Wilde. The list could go on and on—there are that many different shades of comedy.

I don't mean to imply that one style is superior to another. They are simply different. The important point is that writers tend to fall into a certain style. And that's not necessarily wrong, either. Some artists built careers with only one style of painting—flowers, landscapes, portraits, or whatever. They were attracted to one genre, perfected it, and built their reputation on it. That's fine.

However, at the learning stage, it's good for a writer to be aware of different styles. That can be accomplished by trying some. Experiment with different techniques. Doing writing exercises is a perfect way to try some of those comedy writing variations that haven't come to you naturally or that you haven't been automatically attracted to.

But then you might ask: "If a certain style doesn't seem compatible with my talent or I don't care for it, why should I bother with it at all?"

Good question. The answer is that you might surprise yourself. Whatever practice time you devote to various exercises won't hurt you. Trying something new won't destroy whatever potential you have now, but it may develop some new techniques or attractions that you aren't even aware of. You may uncover hidden skills. You may discover latent preferences.

Let me offer an example. One writer selected an exercise of writing "laundry list" jokes on various topics. By "laundry list" I mean a series of gags based on one setup line, like the following:

You know you're getting older when . . .

. . . people start telling you how young you look.

. . . you stop reading magazine articles that are "continued next month."

. . . your birthday candles cost more than the cake.

. . . you have to set your alarm in order to get up in time for your nap.

. . . you think twice about buying green bananas.

. . . your memory improves so much that you begin remembering things that never happened.

. . . and about twenty-five additional gags

He not only had fun writing these but realized he was quite adept at it. He also discovered that one national magazine was willing to pay a considerable amount for these types of gags. The magazine bought several of his pieces and then began calling him with assignments. They devoted one page a month to his laugh lines, and he was assigned at least half of them. It didn't carve out a new career for him, but he found a niche he enjoyed and it paid a fair chunk of change.

Writing exercises develop the skills used in actual comedy writing:

We've discussed the rope-skipping boxer. Though he'll never use the jump rope during the fight, he can still use the lessons learned from it. He's learned to be light and quick on his feet and can use that prowess to avoid the attack of his opponent. The exercise itself isn't used during competition, but the skills acquired from it are. The same is true of the football player who develops an agility that can be used on the field. He's learned to change directions quickly and easily so he can avoid oncoming tacklers. Some golf professionals have their students toss the golf ball underhanded onto the green. That would never be permitted in play, but it teaches the student the correct way to move the hands

and to learn how hard to strike the ball to land it near the hole—skills that will be used during play.

Comedy writing exercises often have the same hidden benefits. In some of my previous comedy writing books and a few of my classes, I promote an exercise that I call 101 Tom Swifties. A Tom Swifty is a form of gag that utilizes a play on words with an *-ly* adverb. Following are a couple of examples:

“I used to feed the lions at the zoo before the accident,” the man said offhandedly.

“We’ll never be in contention unless we get a strong home run hitter,” the baseball manager said ruthlessly.

“Your dog bit a hole in my trousers,” the mailman said deceitfully.

You get the idea.

This exercise teaches the student to analyze and utilize the playfulness of words. “Offhandedly” can mean “casually” or it can mean “the hand is now off.” “Ruthlessly” can mean “without pity” or it can mean “without someone like Babe Ruth playing for our team.” That’s a valid joke writing skill.

This exercise is called 101 Tom Swifties because to complete it the student must write 101 of them. That’s challenging and demanding. Writing twenty of them doesn’t complete the exercise. Writing fifty of them doesn’t, either. Trudging on until you create 101 of them does.

This develops the habit of persevering in one’s comedy writing. It encourages the practice of continuing on even after the writer feels that he or she has exhausted all possible avenues of humor in the topic. That’s a great attribute for a comedy writer. This particular exercise develops that for a writer—almost without him or her realizing it.

Writing exercises can develop specific skills you want to work on:

I’ve told the story of a friend I used to play tennis with. Before any tennis match, the players usually warm up by hitting balls back and forth across the net. The opposing player can stay back and hit ground strokes, or can come forward and practice volleys close to the net. Standard protocol also requires that an opponent offer some high shots so the opponent can practice a few overhead slams.

One gentleman I played against refused when I asked him if he’d like to hit a few overhead shots. He said, “No, I’m no good at that shot, so I never practice it.” Maybe it’s just me, but wouldn’t it be advantageous to practice those shots you’re not that good at? Maybe with some practice, you could become more

proficient at those shots.

Writers, likewise, may have some weaknesses in their craft. Maybe some of your humor lacks a certain zaniness. Maybe your jokes suffer from poor structure. Maybe some gags fail because the wording isn't exactly right or sparkling enough. No one knows where your craft needs development more than you do.

If you spot flaws or weaknesses, do some exercises that help strengthen that particular area. The more weaknesses you eliminate, the better writer you become.

Writing exercises maintain the writing momentum: Stop-and-start writing can be difficult. If too much time elapses between writing sessions, you have to overcome the inertia of not writing. The writer has to build up new enthusiasm and new energy to attack the keyboard. Consistent writing overcomes this. Regular writing sessions build up the momentum of writing. They allow creativity and fresh ideas to flow freely.

Writing exercises can be done at any time. They can be done daily. They don't require an assignment; they don't even require a reason. They can be pursued as a hobby. Your writing becomes more regular, more consistent, and more productive, and of a higher quality.

Where can you find these writing exercises?

One possibility is to create your own. Devise your own gimmicks for practicing different writing techniques. You have unlimited variety here because you're free to manufacture any sort of writing experiment you choose. However, let me offer just one idea as an illustration.

You could open up a joke book, pick one gag that you especially like, and use that as your inspiration to write a half-dozen more jokes on that same topic.

That's a writing exercise that you created. It gets you writing, and it benefits your writing.

Another gimmick you might use is to find some writing exercises that already exist. For instance, David Letterman usually has his "Top Ten List" near the opening of each show. Use that as a gag writing exercise. Come up with a topic and do a "Top Ten List" of your own. How about "Here are the Top Ten Things you might overhear at a Comedy Writers Convention."

Go at it.

Several times in this book we've mentioned Jeff Foxworthy's routine: "You might be a redneck if . . ." Treat that as an exercise. Write a set number of punchlines for this routine.

Or be creative and alter it to suit your own purposes. How about a series of “You might be a comedy writer if . . .” jokes. It might be fun.

The *New Yorker* magazine usually features a joke writing contest on the last page of each issue. In most cases it asks the readers to supply a caption for a cartoon drawing. Turn to that page and generate as many captions as you can for the cartoon. This is not only fun and beneficial, but you can submit your best gags and maybe capture one of the prizes.

Then, too, you might try to find some suggested exercises. In my book on comedy writing, *Comedy Writing Step by Step*, I featured a series of comedy writing exercises in chapter 8. Judging from correspondence I received from readers, that was among the most popular chapters of the book.

Our office publishes a newsletter for comedy writers called *Round Table*, which is available on the Internet. We offer writing exercises in each edition. (This newsletter and contact information can be found at www.comedywritersroom.com.)

I’ve mentioned before that there is a companion volume to this book titled *Comedy Writing Self-Taught Workbook: More than 100 Practical Writing Exercises to Develop Your Comedy Writing Skills*. As the subtitle states, this book contains over one hundred different exercises dealing with writing jokes, sketches, and sitcoms.

But you may want to try a few comedy writing exercises right now. Have at them, and have fun with them:

Various meanings for words: Words are an important part of a comedy writer’s arsenal. They’re not the only form of comedy ammunition, but they’re probably the most abundant. Words can be tricky. They can be playful. They can be used for comedy purposes. For example, there was a hit song years ago called “Volare.” One comic commented on that song:

“Volare” is an Italian word meaning “fly.” It’s important to know that in case you’re walking along the streets of Rome one day and a native says to you, “Excuse me, sir, but your volare is open.”

That’s a gag based on the different acceptable meanings of the word “fly.”

In one exercise, I tried to come up with as many meanings for the word “fly” as I could. I ended up with over twenty definitions. A few were “the insect,” “to travel by plane,” “to soar through the air,” “a type of hit in baseball.”

Now your assignment is to come up with as many others as you can. Think of several variations and even use the dictionary, if necessary.

Now try the same thing with other common words such as “house,” “bear” (which also includes the word “bare”), “dive,” and any others you can think of. It’s fun, and I guarantee you’ll surprise yourself.

Don’t use words: Now that you’ve had some enjoyment exploring the meaning of words, try generating comedy *without words*. It may sound impossible, but remember that Harpo Marx had an entire career without words. Marcel Marceau did, too, except for one word he uttered at the end of the Mel Brooks film *Silent Movie*.

This exercise, though, is slightly different from the comedy of those performers. Here, your assignment is to create at least ten cartoons that have no caption. The image itself is the joke.

This may be hard to visualize, so I’ll list a few examples:

A workman is hanging a sign that reads “THINK.” He is about to hammer it into a glass window.

A man is mowing his lawn with a self-propelled lawn mower. He is desperately chasing the runaway mower as it rushes toward a large picture window in his house.

Two workmen building a tall skyscraper are enjoying lunch on one of the steel beams of the structure. As they sit on one of the girders, the bottle of liquid between them shows that the liquid level is not at all level. Consequently, the building they’re constructing is obviously not level, either.

There’s no need to draw these cartoons. Describing the image is sufficient. Of course, if you’re artistically gifted, then go ahead and sketch away.

Have fun with this exercise.

Dumb jokes: There’s admittedly some ambiguity with this heading. These could be jokes about dumb people or they could simply be gags that are “lame.” None of us need practice in writing “bad” jokes, so we’ll specify that these are gags about dumb folks.

After the two previous exercises, this may seem like a vacation. It feels like an easy project to write “dumb” jokes. The challenge is to write “smart” “dumb” jokes. That may need clarification, too. The gags you create in this exercise should be classy gags about dumb people.

Now that you’re thoroughly confused, your assignment is to write at least ten jokes that show how dumb folks can be. Here are some examples:

My husband is so dumb. I said, “There’s a dead bird,” and he looked up.

He's so dumb he thinks Mount Rushmore is a natural rock formation.

He's so dumb his IQ starts with a minus sign.

Have fun with this exercise—and don't show the results to your dumb friends.

Contradictory comedy: When I was a youngster, practically everyone in our school had memorized the following wacky poem:

Early in the morning, in the middle of the night

Two dead men got up to fight

Back to back they faced each other

Pulled out their knives and shot one another

We all thought this was hilarious because it was all *impossible*. It was a series of contradictory statements. We were just youngsters with immature senses of humor. However, there is some clever comedy based on this same idea—contradictions. Here are a few examples:

I'd give my right arm to be ambidextrous.

He'd be a great trapeze artist if he could just learn to keep his feet on the ground.

I have a twin brother who is four months older than I am.

You get the idea. Now for this exercise, create at least ten gags that utilize the same sort of contradictory logic.

Exaggerate and distort: Much of comedy is hyperbole. For example:

We're getting too used to modern conveniences. I get winded when I use a rotary phone.

We all know that turning a rotary dial is not that exhausting, yet we accept that overstatement.

Phyllis Diller used to exaggerate about her mother-in-law, "Moby Dick":

When she used to come visit us, she'd stay at a nearby motel. In rooms 314, 315, and 316.

She was always a large woman. Her birthday is April 3rd, 4th, and 5th.

Notice the various dimensions of this woman. She's large enough to fill three

motel rooms, and her birth took three days—exaggerations that we accept.

Your assignment for this exercise is to write several jokes that exaggerate or distort. Do six jokes about how large your friend's nose is (or your own nose, if you want to play it safe) and also do six jokes about how long you have to wait for your wife to get ready when it's time to go out.

Have fun with it.

Parallel some great jokes: A good joke can be inspiring. An excellent gag can prompt you to write similar jokes. That's the idea behind this exercise. You are going to list some good jokes and then try to *parallel* them. That means you're going to try to duplicate the ideas in that joke in a joke of your own.

Let me illustrate. Here's a gag I liked:

We've had a lot of mudslides in California lately. I was driving to work the other day, glanced out the window, and my house was making better time than I was.

Nice gag. Now maybe I can use that to write a few of my own that sort of duplicate it.

For example:

We've had a lot of mudslides in California lately. I was driving to work the other day and was rear-ended—by my lawn.

I asked my gardener when he was going to mow my lawn. He said as soon as he finds it.

We've had a lot of mudslides in California lately. It's pretty depressing when you discover that your lawn has been to more interesting places than you have.

Pick five or six favorite jokes of your own and write five or six parallel gags on each one.

Have fun.

You May Want to Skip This Chapter, But Don't

As a comedy writer, you have an obligation to supply good-quality material to your client or to the show you're writing for. It's painful for a comic to march to center stage supported by only mediocre material. I remember once writing a sketch for *The Carol Burnett Show*. I was quite proud of that sketch—until they began performing it before a live audience. The material generated very few laughs, and the performers began to show embarrassment as they stood on the stage and recited the lines. The audience seemed embarrassed by it, too.

Then Joe Hamilton, the executive producer of the show and Carol Burnett's husband, left the control booth, walked onto the stage in the middle of the performance, and said, "Stop doing this." Carol ran to him, hugged him, and announced to the audience, "By stopping this sketch, this man just saved our marriage."

That's how painful poor material can be.

Another time I sat backstage with Bob Hope at the London Palladium. Hope was rehearsing his monologue right before going on to begin a command performance celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's coronation. Hope was going through the cue cards one by one, reciting the gags one last time before the actual performance.

He came to one gag—one that I had written—and said to the cue card guy, "Take that gag out. I don't want to do that joke."

I asked, "Why are you taking that gag out?"

He said, "The queen won't like it."

I said, "The queen will love that joke" (like I know what Queen Elizabeth II likes and doesn't like).

Hope said, "Do you really think she'll like it?"

Still defending my material, I said, "Of course, she will."

Bob Hope then took the cue card out of the pack, handed it to me, and said,

“Then you do it.”

As I held the card, Hope added, “Remember she still has the power to behead.”

Both of these tales are graphic illustrations of how fiercely performers hate to be caught with substandard material (although I still insist Queen Elizabeth would have fallen off her chair laughing at that joke). It makes you a better, more devoted, more inspired writer when you can accept that reality. Comedy performers want good comedy material; good comedy writers supply that commodity.

Conversely, those same clients and performers appreciate top-notch writing. My partner and I wrote another sketch for *The Carol Burnett Show*. We were proud of this one, too. The sketch featured Carol Burnett (ironically, in this sketch she played a queen), Harvey Korman, and Tim Conway.

On tape day, we always taped two separate shows. The first was called “dress rehearsal,” although it was an actual taped performance. Then we took a short break to bring in a different audience and taped the “air show.” The idea was that we could see how each show went over and make changes between the “dress” and the “air” performances.

At the cast and writers meeting between shows, Joe Hamilton (still the executive producer and Carol’s spouse) said, “We’re not going to do that queen sketch in the second show.”

Carol Burnett said, “Yes, we are.”

Joe said, “Carol, we don’t have to do it. It played flawlessly in ‘dress.’”

Carol insisted, “We’re going to do it again.”

Joe was determined. He said, “Carol, it was perfect and we can save money by not taping it twice. Why do you want to do it again?”

Carol said, “Joe, when we get material like this, we love it. Let’s do it again.”

We redid the sketch at the air show. It played beautifully again.

Needless to say, it’s demoralizing to send a group of performers onstage with comedy that’s so ineffective that they stop performing it in the middle of the show—with the audience witnessing the abortion of the sketch and with the performers so relieved to “stop doing this.” No writer can be proud of that.

On the other hand, it’s glorious to hear the actors rave over the comedy material. To hear them so entranced by it that they want to perform it again even if there is no technical need to do so.

But there’s more to it than just that inner glow of having written good

comedy material. Solid, dependable writing enhances your career. It builds your reputation and boosts your earning power.

A good comedy writer should develop empathy for the person or the people onstage. He or she should have some inkling of what those performers are experiencing—both when the material works and when it doesn't. In order to fully appreciate those emotions, the writer should have some experience at performing.

Experience is part of the learning process. For example, you could read all there is to know about the mechanics of a good golf swing. Countless books will illustrate the various segments of the swing ad nauseam. They will explain the grip, the stance, the rotation of the shoulders, the beginning of the downswing, the placement of the ball, the follow-through, and a whole lot more. You can study these treatises, memorize them, and know them so well that you could score 100 percent if given a test. Yet with all of that knowledge, if you put a golf ball on the ground and swing at it for the first time, chances are you'll hit a terrible golf shot (if you hit the ball at all). Practical experience is essential to learning.

In teaching yourself to write comedy, you should experience the almost addictive thrill of hearing people laugh at something you say or do. It's a heady sensation. You should also endure the agony of the gag that bombs. It's a sickening sensation. Experience it once and you won't want to go through it again. You will understand why the cast of *The Carol Burnett Show* was overjoyed when the head man said, "Stop doing this."

Some of you may be wondering why you should force yourself to experience these sensations. After all, you know that comics love it when they get laughs and they hate it when they don't. What more is there to know? There are the emotions involved. Sure, intellectually, you know that comics like to get laughs, but do you as a writer really know how sublime that feels?

Probably not, but you should.

Intellectually you know that comics dislike it when the audience doesn't respond with uproarious laughter. But do you really know how that wrenches at your gut? How you can grow wide-eyed with a combination of surprise and fear? How you can break out in clammy perspiration commonly known as "flop sweat"?

Probably not, but you should.

Why should you, you might ask?

You may remember a show that was on TV years ago called *The Wide World of Sports*. It would open with a voice-over that said, “The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” I forget what image it showed on the screen for the “thrill of victory,” but I do recall that the “agony of defeat” showed a hapless ski jumper who slipped off the ramp and knocked himself senseless in the fall. He wasn’t hurt seriously, but it was a stunning sight to watch week after week. But athletes were surely aware of the meaning of those phrases—“thrill of victory” and “agony of defeat.” Being aware of the consequences prompted athletes to devote the time, and effort to the practice that would be necessary to feel the thrill of victory and avoid the agony of defeat.

Comedy writers, too, if they’re aware of the emotions of success and failure, will bring more dedication to their work. There’s a saying that you should “pack your own parachute.” The idea is that you don’t want to throw yourself out of an airplane with a chute that’s been carelessly loaded and may tangle during the fall. But you’re never sure that whoever packed the chute was careful and dedicated. It’s easy not to get too involved when you’re not the one who will suffer the consequences.

I know from experience that some writers will work on the material only until it’s “good enough.” As a head writer for a certain show, I would often have to go to the writing staff with a request from the star for a new line.

One writer would always object. “Why do we need a new line?”

“Because the star of the show doesn’t feel this one is strong enough.”

The writer would say, “Well, I think it’s good enough.”

Of course, the response to that is that you’re not going to stand onstage and live or die by that line. You’re not going to jump out of a plane with a parachute that is packed “good enough.”

This chapter is entitled “You May Want to Skip This Chapter, But Don’t.” The reason many writers may want to skip it is that this chapter is going to recommend that, as part of your self-education, you get some practical experience in delivering your own comedy writing.

This chapter is suggesting that you go out and find out what it’s like to get laughs or not get laughs with comedy. This doesn’t mean that you have to go to open-mike nights at the local comedy club. If you get a chance to do that and you are inclined to try, that would serve the purpose. However, there are other avenues where you can try out your comedy chops.

I served my apprenticeship by writing roasts for people who were retiring or

celebrating anniversaries at the place where I worked. At each function, I would do a routine of about thirty jokes “roasting” the guest of honor. This was great training because the material for each banquet had to be new since the audience was usually the same people. I wanted the material to be excellent because I was the one who would be at the microphone. I would enjoy or suffer the consequences. Many of the gags I used at these parties I would later rewrite and sell to nationally known comedians.

If you’re scheduled to speak at some function at your workplace, try opening with a joke. Maybe your bowling league or the little league your kids belong to will be hosting a fund-raising party. Great, volunteer to be master of ceremonies and try a bit of humor. You’ll learn something from the experience.

At private parties, volunteer to roast the person celebrating a birthday or the couple celebrating an anniversary.

There is an organization called Toastmasters International. It is world-wide and has chapters in practically every community in the nation. Toastmasters International trains people to speak well. If you join a chapter, you’ll be required to speak periodically. When you do, use some of your comedy material. In fact, the organization has contests for humorous speakers at all levels. It’s a great way to gain experience.

For many years, I hosted comedy writing conventions annually. Many of my writing colleagues would serve on the faculty and offer classes at these seminars. Once I called on a friend whom I had helped with his comedy writing career. I asked if he would come to our annual gathering and speak to the attendees. He said, “Gene, I appreciate all you’ve done for me. I will gladly mow your lawn when it needs it. I will iron shirts for you if you like. But I cannot stand in front of a group of people and speak.”

So I understand if writers prefer to skip this chapter. I can appreciate the idea that they would prefer to be behind the keyboard and behind the scenes. Nevertheless, I still suggest that you attempt to deliver some of your own humor, somewhere, somehow. It may be a gratifying experience; it may turn out to be repulsive. In either case, you’ll recover. And in all cases, you will teach yourself something about comedy writing.

Part Two: Sketch Writing

A Brief Introduction to Sketch Writing

Sketch writing is one of the most unrestricted genres of comedy. With standup writing you're limited to the preferences and delivery of the individual comic. In sitcom writing, you have the same characters week after week. With sketches, though, you're free to create any character you like. You can put that character into any situation at all. If you would like the star of your show to become an astronaut, you simply write "Dressed as an astronaut" into the script. How about if you want the star of your show to suddenly behave like a puppy? You write that into the stage directions. You can change the sets, the formats, the characters, the type of dialogue, anything at all at any time. It's considerable freedom for a writer.

Of course, there are certain rules to follow. For instance, a sketch should have a solid premise. The premise is the basic concept—what the piece is about. One sketch may be about a loving husband bringing home, for no particular reason, a bouquet for his spouse. Now she accuses him of trying to cover up for some trespass or another. That's what the sketch is about. That's the premise.

Places and costumes are not valid premises. Many writers have said, "Let's dress the star and costar up as cowboys. It'll be hilarious." Those are costumes. The sketch may turn out to be hilarious but not until you provide some sort of reason why they're dressed in Western garb. What do they do or what happens to them once they're cowboys? That's the premise.

Some writers have said, "Let's put them in an amusement park. It'll be hilarious." The same caveat applies. An amusement park is a location. What happens once they're in the amusement park? That's the premise.

You've often heard it said that sketches need a beginning, a middle, and an end. That's true, but it's rather vague. Maybe it's clearer to say that you need some way to introduce the premise. That's the beginning. Then you have to have some fun with the premise as the sketch develops. That's the middle. Naturally, you have to conclude the sketch some way. That's the ending.

There may be some sketches that are simply one idea. I refer to these as "bits." I consider the famous "Who's on First?" routine performed by Bud Abbott and Lou Costello a bit. The one idea that runs throughout this piece is the confusion with the words: "Who's on first. What's on second. I don't know is on third."

Another example of bits is the idea of telling a story using spoonerisms. A spoonerism is

an intentional interchange of sounds, usually the beginning sounds, of two words. For example, “a windy day” becomes “a dindy way,” “a moonlit night” becomes “a noonlit might.” One bit like this that has become popular is the story of Cinderella told exclusively with spoonerisms. Of course, it becomes the story of “Rindycellar.” The beginnings of words are exchanged throughout so that “at the Moke of Stridnight, Rindycellar slops her dripper.” However, in the end “she marries the Pransom Hince and they hive lappily after ever.”

You can see that you could have fun telling almost any classic story using this device. And you may create some funny sounding bits using other wordplay techniques.

Those are the exceptions to the beginning, middle, and end format for sketches. For the most part, though, you should begin your sketch writing with a solid premise—one that you could express with just a sentence or two.

You’re about to begin to teach yourself to write solid, funny sketches. Remember that the best instructor you can have for this section of your learning sits in the corner of your den. It’s your TV set.

Your Best Mentor Is in Your Den

Isaac Newton, one of the most creative thinkers in history, said, “If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” This genius admitted readily that much of his innovation was dependent on the contributions of those who preceded him. As aspiring writers, we should recognize that we can learn from the many talented writers who went before us. And also from contemporary colleagues.

If we want to stand “on the shoulders of giants,” all we have to do is turn to the great educator that sits in the corner of our den—our television set.

For decades, countless brilliant and creative folks have been writing sketches and sitcoms for television. They’ve entertained us for years beginning with the first two variety shows I remember—*Texaco Star Theatre* starring Milton Berle and *The Toast of the Town* starring Ed Sullivan and featuring pretty much everyone else in show business, right up to your favorite shows on the air today. Many of these writers have become famous names that you would recognize immediately; some of them you’ve probably never heard of.

I would say that none of these people studied sketch or sitcom writing in college. They learned by observation—by watching and listening. A few of the early ones got their education from vaudeville and burlesque. They converted comedy routines from the stage to the new medium called television. The rest had the benefit of learning from these pioneers. The new breed of writers learned to write television by watching television. Again, “by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

That’s still the best way to learn the craft. Your TV can teach you to write. Just by pushing a button or inserting a disc, you can enjoy and learn from some of the best writers in the business. Remember, too, that all of these great writers learned from one another. Now you have the extraordinary opportunity to learn from them.

In learning to write stand-up comedy gags, this book has suggested that you study the working comics, analyze their routines, and try to replicate those of your favorite or favorites. The same applies to writing longer forms—sketches or

sitcoms. Good study material is easy to gather nowadays with shows on television weekly and also entire seasons of excellent sketch and sitcom material readily available on DVDs. Many of the brilliant sketches featured on Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, written by legends Neil Simon, Larry Gelbart, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, and other greats, are obtainable. Carol Burnett has published DVDs of many of the great sketches from the eleven years that her show was on the air. Also, many hilarious sketches from other shows can be seen on the Internet. There is a wealth of material for you to learn from.

Which shows should you watch and learn from?

First, study those shows that you like, your personal favorites. You have a good sense of humor, so if you laugh at these shows, it indicates that they are funny. And, after all, "funny" is what we're shooting for.

Once I was sitting with Bob Hope and I recommended a joke for his upcoming show. He looked at me strangely and said, "That's not funny." Now I had to defend my ad-lib. I said, "I know that, Bob, but it has powerful meaning. If you say that in front of your audience, they'll applaud." Hope looked at me even more strangely this time and said, "How long have you been writing philosophy?"

A comedy writer should write comedy. Comedy generates laughter. Therefore, the shows you laugh at are good models for you to analyze, study, and replicate.

Also your favorites are probably an indication of the style of comedy that you prefer. The style that you prefer is most likely the style you would write best. Enthusiasm is a large factor in writing humor, and the shows that you're particularly attracted to are more likely to generate that enthusiasm.

Second, you might search out shows that are consistently good. That doesn't mean that all of the shows you watch must be spectacular or outstanding. That's almost impossible for any show to accomplish. However, certain shows can maintain a high level of excellence. Selecting one of these guarantees that whichever segment you study should be representative.

Third, it would be wise to choose shows that are highly regarded by the industry. It doesn't mean that you should bow to the opinion of the critics. If you like a certain show and you feel you can learn from it, then use it to help your writing—regardless of what anyone else thinks. Nevertheless, a show that is well received is sort of a backup for your own evaluation.

Also, if the people in the profession endorse the show, it must be doing something right. So if you use that show as an educational tool, you'll be learning

techniques that have been accepted by the TV industry. That can't be a bad thing.

Fourth, select shows to study that you feel you can write for. Often we use the phrase “study, analyze, and replicate.” Part of teaching yourself to write comedy is attempting to reproduce what you're studying. It's futile to study something that you don't feel you can write. Now this doesn't mean that the writing should come easily. Not at all. In fact, you gain more if the writing is a substantial challenge. The standard expression in physical exercise is “No pain; no gain.” So you should expect to push yourself with your writing exercises. But you should push yourself with the expectation that you can do it. If you take piano lessons, you don't expect to be able to play *Rhapsody in Blue* after the first lesson. But you should have the confidence that you can learn eventually to play with some skill.

These suggestions apply to the shows that you want to devote much of your study time to. However, to be well rounded in comedy writing, you should familiarize yourself with all styles of writing. The temptation is to suggest that you watch only superb examples of comedy writing, but that can be limiting. Of course, study, analyze, and replicate only the best. However, just as we suggested in writing stand-up material, you can also learn from the *less than best*.

Developing any skill means learning what to do. It also means learning what not to do. A good boxer should learn how to throw a quick, powerful punch. However, he may also painfully learn that he should not expose his chin too temptingly while throwing that punch. The opponent may have a quick, powerful punch of his own. A baseball pitcher may learn to throw a killer curve ball, but he may also learn not to throw it at the wrong time to some batters who love to pounce on a hanging curve and knock it out of the park. If you're taking piano lessons, it's important to learn to hit the right keys on the piano. But it's also important that you not hit any wrong keys. Try hitting a few as you're playing and you'll quickly learn why. There definitely are things you should do and things you shouldn't do.

That applies to writing comedy, also. One good way to learn about those things you shouldn't do is to watch shows that do the things a show shouldn't do. Learn skills from the well-written shows; learn to avoid mistakes from those shows that have made them.

The remainder of this book deals with teaching yourself to write sketches and situation comedies. You'll do that by watching television—both present-day shows and whatever shows from the past you can gather. Your curriculum will be

to watch, analyze, study, and do writing exercises to develop your talent.

It's important to watch with a purpose. I once asked a nationally known comedian if he thought that the increase in comedy clubs across the nation was a benefit to aspiring comics. He said that it's a benefit to the smart ones. In other words, it offers beginning comics an opportunity for more stage time, but that is useful only if they learn from it.

I once heard a tennis instructor talking to a student. The student said, "I should be a much better tennis player than I am. After all, I've had eleven years of experience." The instructor said, "No, you've had one year of experience eleven times."

Experience serves no purpose unless you make an effort to learn from it. Watching superb comedy writing on television is an excellent way to learn to write comedy . . . but only if you make the effort to learn.

Let's begin to learn to write comedy sketches.

16

How to Watch Sketches

Before watching, analyzing, and studying sketches to learn how to write them, it may be beneficial to discover one thing that sketches are not. I came to television writing as a one-line writer—sometimes referred to condescendingly by others in the profession as a “gag writer.” Learning to write sketches and sitcom scripts became part of my on-the-job training. One of the first things I learned was that a sketch is *not* a series of jokes tied together with a story line.

Understand that a good sketch will contain a string of good jokes. It has to. If it's a comedy sketch, it must generate laughs. As we discussed earlier, anything that makes people laugh is a joke. It's often difficult for comedy writers to accept the fact that the comedy is not paramount in all writing. It's necessary, but it's not the dominating factor.

With sketches the premise takes precedence. This is even more relevant in situation comedies, but we'll come to that later. The premise is what gives the writing direction. It provides the reason for the entire piece. The jokes, as we said, are necessary, but they are controlled and motivated by the idea you're presenting. The premise will dictate the jokes.

When the premise is paramount and the gags follow its guidelines, the entire piece becomes cohesive. It has purpose and drive to it.

On the other hand, when the jokes take precedence, the foundation of the sketch can appear flimsy. It sometimes becomes obvious that the story line was slapped together simply to give the writer an excuse to use some favorite gags. A writer can get away with it occasionally, but it's not the ideal way to learn to construct a worthwhile sketch.

The best mentor you can have to guide your sketch writing education, as we suggested earlier, is your TV set. You learn by watching. Therefore, you should have a fairly sizable collection of various sketches to watch. I mentioned earlier that many legendary variety shows offer episodes on DVD. *Your Show of Shows*, featuring Sid Caesar and his cast of crazies, has published a representative collection. *The Carol Burnett Show* has published several seasons' worth of fine sketches. *Saturday Night Live* also has selected sketches available. In addition, you

can often call up several famous and popular sketches on the Internet. In some cases, the Internet may even offer scripts of well-known shows or individual sketches. And, of course, with the DVR, you can also file away more current shows that feature sketch comedy.

Consider this collection, however you acquire it, as your textbook for teaching yourself to write professional-quality sketch material.

Simply assembling the material and watching it, however, doesn't provide the education you're looking for. You must watch the pieces with a purpose. The key words in this entire self-teaching process are to watch, to analyze, to study, and then to replicate. Make a concerted effort to learn from the professionals. Then, of course, you have to put what you learn into practice. You can listen to a maestro play a piano concerto, but for you to be able to play it competently, you'll have to get the sheet music, sit at the keyboard, and teach your fingers to cooperate.

Here are a few of the things you should note when watching a sketch:

What is the premise of the sketch? What is the sketch about? What is the basic idea behind the action? You should be able to spot this quickly and then write it succinctly—in a sentence or two. On *The Carol Burnett Show* one of the most popular sketches was the one that featured Carol coming down the stairs dressed in the curtains that she took from the window—curtain rod and all. The sketch was entitled “Went with the Wind” and was obviously a spoof of the legendary film *Gone with the Wind*. That's the brief description that would define the premise—it was a parody of *Gone with the Wind*.

Sid Caesar had a sketch on his show that began with a bullfighter lying on his deathbed. He had been horribly gored, and it was obvious that he would not long survive. He claimed to be hungry so one of the people at his bedside offered to get him whatever he wanted. He took the dying toreador's request for a sandwich. But before he could go get it, others at the bedside also asked him to bring them back something, too—you know, as long as he was going anyway. As the sketch developed, everyone wanted some sort of sandwich and all had different requirements. Some wanted cheese; others no cheese. Some wanted mustard; others mayo. They all forgot about the wounded bullfighter and became more concerned with placing their lunch order. That was the premise of the sketch—when someone is going for sandwiches or refreshments, the orders can get very complicated.

Study each sketch you watch and figure out the driving force behind it—the premise.

How did that idea originate? I worked on a variety show that featured four or five different sketches a week. Even though we had ten or twelve writers on staff, creating original sketch ideas was nevertheless a challenging writing demand. On a show like that, there are times when it seems as though there are absolutely no ideas left. And if any ideas are left, you and your partner certainly can't find them.

When the ideas dry up, you have to aggressively pursue them. A writing team on a weekly variety show can't sit back and wait for inspiration to bless them from above. They have to actively find ways to uncover ideas.

Many times we would all get together and review things that had happened to us individually. Often, things we felt were pedestrian events would trigger another writing team to elaborate on it or give it a switch that could be used for a workable sketch idea.

One example of that was when one writer told us that he and his girl had gone out for dinner and the waitress always had another girl following her around. The second waitress never spoke; she simply was there. This writer asked about it and learned that this young woman was in training to become a waitress.

The rest of the writing team took this kernel and turned it into a very funny sketch in which one actor came in to rob a bank. The teller was thrilled because she was training someone to be a teller and this experience would be useful. The bank robber was delighted, too, because he was training another person to be a bank robber. The sketch continued until a policeman came in with his service revolver drawn and told everyone to freeze. Then, of course, he called in a policeman trainee.

That entire sketch evolved from one writer telling about his experience at dinner the night before.

My partner and I frequently used a book called *How to Write Plots That Sell*, by F. A. Rockwell. This book was published in 1975 but is still available today at bookstores or Internet booksellers. The author offered several devices to trigger creative ideas. For instance, you might draw from classic stories such as "Snow White" or *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. It suggested that jokes were a valuable resource for stories. Sometimes you can take a saying such as "Look before you leap" and use that as a basis for a sketch or story idea. It listed several others.

Every sketch begins with an idea and every idea comes from somewhere. In watching the sketches that you've collected, try to imagine how the premise came about. Could it have been prompted by another famous story? Could it have come from a joke that the writers heard? Might it be an illustration of a

well-known adage?

It may serve you well to try to get into the mind of the writers to see what produced this particular sketch premise. You may argue that it's impossible to tell from the final product what initiated it. And you'd be right. There's no way to read the writers' minds. Nevertheless, you can benefit from trying. Even if you're wrong in your assumption, you learn something. Learning, after all, is the purpose of this entire endeavor.

Whatever thoughts you come up with that might have prompted this particular sketch are workable ideas that you can use to inspire sketches of your own. In essence, you're now writing your own version of *How to Write Plots That Sell*.

How is the premise introduced? They say in comedy that timing is everything. Surprise is a major factor in getting laughs, and how and when an idea is introduced is a big determining factor for surprise. Is the premise stated right at the top or is it slowly introduced along the way?

One show I was on ran a sketch where a politician was giving a boring campaign speech and the gentleman seated next to him at the head table kept doing strange things that were hilarious to the audience, but the speaker was unaware of them. The idea was introduced gradually and kept building as the sketch continued.

In another sketch, two gentlemen were boarding a plane and the premise was stated right up front. One gentleman told the other he was seated one row behind him, yet he paid very much less because he was flying "no frills." "I get the same treatment you do, but I pay much less money." We immediately learned that he wouldn't get the same treatment.

Keeping in mind that timing is tremendously important in comedy, note how the premise is introduced to the viewing public. Analyze that. Would you have done it differently? Would your way have been more effective?

What type of sketch is this? As you watch the various sketches, notice the structure of the writing. Try to determine how the sketch progresses. A sketch, as with most storytelling writing, has a purpose. The featured character or characters have a goal. In pursuing that goal, the character meets with obstacles or adversaries—something that inhibits the accomplishment of that objective. Finally, there is a resolution. The character is either victorious or defeated. However, the progression of events can be different. Here are two different forms, although in your viewing you may discover others.

Progressive sketch: This piece is usually formatted in chronological progression. You begin at the beginning and allow events to occur in sequence until the denouement. With this format, plot point A must happen before plot point B can take place. Plot point C then can occur, leading into plot point D and so on until the story is concluded.

An example of this type of sketch would be the takeoff on *Gone with the Wind* that we touched on earlier. The original film progressed chronologically so the sketch also developed the same way.

Episodic sketch: This format allows the jokes or the obstacles to the goal to occur in any sequence. In other words, plot point A does not necessarily have to happen before plot point B can take place. An illustration of this type of sketch would be the famous Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner cartoons. The goal here is for the Coyote to destroy the Road Runner. To accomplish that goal he creates elaborate schemes. He will plant dynamite in strategic spots. He will paint tunnels onto solid rock. He will attach springs to his feet in order to outrun the Road Runner. The punchline invariably is that the plans never work. They not only don't work, but they backfire catastrophically on the Coyote.

The dynamite doesn't go off—until Coyote comes closer to see what the problem is and it detonates leaving him a charred mess. The fake tunnel he paints onto solid rock suddenly transforms into a real passageway as the Road Runner zips through. When the Coyote stands in front of it scratching his head, a truck roars through the tunnel, leaving a smashed Coyote flattened on the highway.

The sequence is irrelevant in most of these. The tunnel could have come before the dynamite or after it. Once the punchline happens, the plot proceeds to the next joke. The charred Coyote returns to his normal self and the squashed Coyote regains his figure.

Essentially, this format is a series of unrelated jokes that can be placed into the final piece in any order.

A bit: This format is an anomaly. Rather than following the standard storytelling procedure, it is usually a one-joke premise. It should be funny, of course, but it doesn't adhere to the traditional "beginning-middle-end" narrative.

As mentioned earlier, the famous Abbott and Costello routine "Who's on First?" is an example of a bit. The fun comes from the confusion over the names of the players: "Who's on first base?," "What's on second base?," and "I don't know is playing third." There's no real purpose to the sketch except to have fun with the confusion over the names.

You can find this sketch on the Internet by googling “Who’s on First?”

There’s a sketch that Johnny Carson did on *The Tonight Show* that illustrates this technique. He performed it with Jack Webb, who starred in *Dragnet*.

On *Dragnet*, the dialogue was usually very clipped and succinct. As Jack Webb’s character would often say, “We’re just after the facts.” The sketch with Carson and Webb featured the same type of drama. The fun was created though when all or most of the words began with “C” or “Cl.” As the sketch played out we discover that a person named Claude Cooper from Cleveland copped some copper clappers that were kept in a closet.

Where does the fun come from in the sketch? In the Sid Caesar “dying bullfighter” sketch we mentioned, the fun comes from the irony of all these people surrounding a beloved toreador who is on his deathbed, yet they ignore him to make sure that whoever is picking up the food gets their order straight. In the “Went with the Wind” takeoff, the fun came from parodying the legendary film. In “Who’s on First?” the humor is generated when Lou Costello can’t seem to find out who is playing first, when in fact, Who is playing first. And with the Carson-Webb sketch, the laughter builds as more and more words begin with “Cl.”

In devising a sketch premise, it’s always beneficial to know where the jokes will be coming from.

How long does the sketch run? There’s no standard time demand for sketches. They can run for as long as they sustain the laughs. However, after a certain amount of screen time, they do seem to have diminishing returns. The basic premise can support the humor for only so long.

By timing the sketches you watch, you should be able to get a feel for the most efficient length.

How effective is the sketch? As you’re watching the various sketches, evaluate them. Critique the comedy content. How quickly do the laughs come? Evaluate the pace of the piece. Are there places where the action seems to slow down? Can you determine why the sketch slows down in certain spots? If you were to rewrite this sketch or to oversee the rewriting of this piece, how would you avoid or eliminate these slow stretches?

All of this can give you information that will be beneficial when you start typing out your own comedy sketches.

Of course, the real teaching process begins with some actual writing. Watching

and analyzing well-written sketches is the first step, but the real learning begins when you get to the keyboard and tap out dialogue and stage directions of your own.

With that in mind, it would be well to select a few of these sketches that you've watched and try to replicate them. You can take the basic premise and try to *parallel* it. By paralleling, I mean to come up with another idea that is similar to the one you watched and then with the new idea, and try to match the sketch plot point by plot point.

To use longer stories to illustrate, you are familiar with the basic plot of the young gunfighter who wants to challenge "the fastest gun in the West." You parallel that by having a young pool expert who is determined to challenge and defeat the world's greatest pool player. The movie *The Hustler* featured Paul Newman as the newcomer challenging Jackie Gleason who played "Minnesota Fats," the reigning champ. Similar, aren't they?

You can also create new premises that are similar to the ones you've watched and then try to write entirely new sketches. For instance, both "Who's on First?" and Carson's "Copper Clapper Caper" were based on fun with words. You might try to come up with a new way to use words or language to generate other funny ideas for bits.

Even though most of this chapter deals with watching TV sketches (and later, sitcoms), your self-education should also include reading some television scripts. After all, most of your work as a writer will deal with ink on a page. You won't have the benefit, as you write, of seeing the material performed. You'll have to visualize that. It would be good to gain some experience with that right now, as you're teaching yourself to write for television.

You'll gain certain benefits from reading a script that you won't get from watching it performed.

You'll learn the correct format. Any writing you submit for sale—film scripts, TV scripts, magazine articles, books, whatever—should be submitted in the proper format. Any material you submit that isn't in the correct format will appear amateurish to the professionals who read it. You don't necessarily have to conform to all of the meticulous details, but your manuscript should look professional.

To learn the format for taped comedy shows, you should try to acquire some actual scripts. Reading scripts that are published in book form can be useful in certain ways but not for seeing the actual typed presentation.

How do you obtain actual scripts? You may call or write to any show that

you're interested in, and ask. If you live in the Los Angeles area, you could contact the Writers Guild, which has a library where you can at least glance through some professional scripts. Also, of course, you can search the Internet. Some websites offer scripts for sale, but you might also find one or two that allow you to download and print out authentic scripts.

You can get a feel for page count from an actual script. How many written pages will run how many minutes of television time? By watching various sketches, you have a sense for how long they can run effectively on the screen. Now you can learn how many pages your sketches should run. Again, it's a professional feel. If a show typically airs sketches that average four to six minutes in length, you don't want to submit one that goes over twenty-four minutes. It simply doesn't look professional.

By studying a real television script, you can discover the "look" of a well-written manuscript. Typically, scripts will have a *pattern* to them. Without even reading a word of dialogue, you can see if the writing is appropriate. There's a rhythm or a cadence to the dialogue that you can visually see in the writing. Generally, the speeches will have a predictable length. This doesn't mean that each chunk of dialogue should run a precise number of words or lines, but on average, they will conform to a standard. You'll see very few long stretches of dialogue from one performer. There may be instances when the piece demands some longer speeches, but for the most part, long soliloquies will be divided by other speeches. The listeners may add "Oh, really?" or "Why do you say that?"—anything to break the speech into more manageable chunks. Looking at several pages of almost any televised script should give you an idea of this traditional pattern.

One concept, though, is more apparent while watching a script than reading one. In reading a script, you must force yourself to be on the lookout for it. That is that the performers onstage should be kept active. If they're not, they start to look like props rather than actors. The performers call this "catching flies."

You should look for this as you read a script and, of course, be aware of it as you write your script. If performers are on-screen, they should be active. They should occasionally have something to say or do. If there is absolutely nothing for them to say or do during a scene, then provide them with an exit. Get them off camera until they can play an active role in the scene.

As you read, you should also take notice of the stage directions. These are the instructions written for the director or the actors who are written into the script. Stage directions can define a setting, actions that the actors should perform, ways of presenting a line—anything that is necessary to get the writer's idea across.

Notice how extensive they are. Note also whether they are necessary or not.

You won't be able to tell this from reading a script, but most writers have learned from experience that directors and performers are often irritated by unnecessary stage directions. In a sense, they feel that they intrude on their areas of expertise. A director will say, "Don't tell me how to plan my shots." A performer will say, "Don't tell me how to deliver my lines. I'm an actor; I'll interpret them the way I feel I should."

One time while doing a Bob Hope special, the people who drew up the cue cards underlined a certain word—the word that was to be emphasized for the joke. When that card came up, Bob Hope was irritated. He said, "Who put that underline there? I don't need help figuring out where the joke is. I don't need underlines to tell me how to tell a joke."

Before we could continue on with the show, the offending cue card had to be destroyed and another one, without underlining, drawn up. That's how offended professionals can get when you try to tell them how to do their job.

Study and analyze the stage directions you see in the scripts you read. Then use what you learn in writing your own scripts.

Sketch Endings

All good things must come to an end, including good sketches. Good sketches, in fact, should come to good endings. Just as every joke should have a powerful punchline, every sketch should have a solid, definite resolution.

That's not always easy for the writer to accomplish. Here's a personal anecdote (and confession) about both the importance of and the difficulty of writing satisfying sketch endings. My partner and I noticed that on one variety show we worked on, the sketches we turned in would inevitably come back from the head writer or the producer with several rewrite notes. That's expected and part of the job description. However, one of the notes invariably was "Could use a better ending."

When we wrote the first draft of the piece, we devoted a considerable amount of time and effort to the ending. We appreciated the importance of the resolution and we wanted it to have the best possible ending. When the powers-that-be demanded a new ending, we would have to write one, so we did. However, the newer ending was usually, in our opinion, less powerful. To be honest, we did sometimes surprise ourselves and come up with a more dramatic and funnier ending. That was the exception, though, rather than the rule.

So we devised a devious device that we felt helped us to get the best ending. We would write the sketch as well as we could and end it as powerfully as we could. Then we would write a substitute ending and attach it to the first draft. (I warned you it was devious.)

Now when the "Could use a better ending" note came back attached to our first draft, we would simply take the ending we had already written out of the drawer, let a little bit of time pass, and then submit it as the "rewritten" new ending.

It generally worked. As devilish as that ploy was, we considered it a win-win situation. The head writer and the producer got the new ending that they wanted, and we got the original ending that we wanted. This tale does demonstrate the importance that's attached to sketch endings by the producer, the head writer, and the individual writers.

Now I feel I should counter with another anecdote that shows how devoted the writers are to the endings of the sketches they write. One time our entire staff had worked on a very funny, well-written sketch that dealt with a husband and wife trying to sleep in a strange motel room and bothered by some sort of mysterious insect. The critter was never shown on camera, but it did produce much turmoil as an invisible antagonist.

When the body of the sketch was completed and the writers were satisfied that it was hilarious, we needed an ending. After much thought, discussion, and effort, we ended the sketch by having the husband inadvertently step on the offending insect. The sketch ended with a noticeable squishing sound.

We were done.

Or were we? We were all relieved to have finalized the sketch, but at the same time we experienced a feeling of uneasiness. No one wanted to reopen the writing, but we all silently felt that this was too grim an ending to air. Finally, someone spoke up: “We can’t do this.” We all agreed.

Note that this ending was not rejected by the head writer or the producer. It hadn’t gotten to them. Neither was it turned down by the network censors. No, the writers had decided, on their own, that we needed a more appropriate, more humane ending.

Consequently, we scrapped that ending and began considering a new one. The one we finally submitted was accepted, aired on the show, and was much better than the original “squish.”

Since the producers, the head writers, and the writers are so committed to superb sketch endings, it would be wise in your studies to devote particular attention to them. Here are a few ideas that you should consider as you view each of the comedy pieces you’ve selected for study:

Did you, as a viewer, like the ending? Without getting too analytical or looking for any technicalities, simply note whether the resolution of this sketch was satisfying to you or was it disappointing. There’s no right or wrong response here. It’s merely an opinion: Did you like the ending or not?

Do you feel you could improve on this specific sketch resolution? This is slightly different from the first question because you still may feel you could improve even those endings that you felt were satisfactory. There’s always a possibility that something good could be made better.

Consider why you didn’t like the finish of certain sketches: Now you can get more analytical. You’ve already formed an opinion; now attempt to

justify it. Maybe it wasn't funny enough. To you, perhaps, it didn't feel like an ending—the sketch just seemed to abruptly halt. It could be that in your mind it failed to resolve the problems. These are just a few of the thoughts that you could have about some of the disappointing sketch endings.

You can come up with any reasons you feel are valid. Remember, you're using these sketches to teach yourself how to write a good sketch. In searching out and defining some of the potential flaws, you may learn some of the errors to avoid in your writing.

Who was mostly responsible for the resolution of the problem? Was it the featured player in the sketch? Did the resolution come as a surprise from a secondary character? Was an outside character introduced to initiate the resolution? Did it come from the character that it should have come from?

Suppose, for example, you were watching a detective show. Since most of us are familiar with the character of Columbo, let's use that character for our discussion. A crime is committed; Columbo begins his investigation and cleverly begins to uncover the villain's untruths. We would expect that Columbo would eventually solve the crime, wouldn't we? It would seem to be a cheat if another detective suddenly figured out what happened and revealed the criminal.

It would also be unsatisfying if we watched the detective mystery for an entire hour thinking we would eventually catch the prime suspect—the one Columbo has been dogging throughout the episode; then suddenly a character who has not been on-screen during the show appears and confesses to the crime.

Examples like these are reasons why you should study who motivates the finish of the sketch.

How did the sketch ending evolve? Notice whether the sketch finale flowed naturally out of the sketch story or not. Did the ending of the sketch feel like it was a part of the entire piece or did it seem like it was introduced conveniently as a way to end the sketch? Did the resolution feel believable? Was the ending predictable or a total surprise? Was there a key plot point that motivated the resolution?

As you view various comedy pieces, you'll come up with different answers to these questions. Sometimes the story will prompt the ending; other times the ending will seem motivated by extraneous elements. Some finales will feel natural; others won't. As you discover the different formats, try to evaluate which ones usually produce the most satisfying and effective endings. By doing this, you're teaching yourself how to create the most persuasive endings for the sketches you will write.

Does the ending provide a definite finality for the piece? Does the sketch come to a dramatic and definite ending or does it merely seem to *dissolve*? As you view it, do you feel that the problems have been resolved and the piece is concluded, or do you feel that some elements are left unresolved? Does this feel like the end of this sketch or the beginning of an entirely new sketch?

Does the sketch come full circle? In other words, is the problem that was stated at the beginning of the sketch resolved satisfactorily? Has the sketch told a complete story?

Does the finale contradict anything that preceded it in the piece? This may require a good hard look at the entire teleplay. Sometimes a finale may inadvertently nullify some of the action that occurred during the telling of the story. Here's an extreme example of this: Imagine a married couple being tormented by strange-looking creatures. They are frightened. They try to beat them off, shoot at them, set fires to scare them away . . . and so on. For the ending, the husband says to the wife, "Our children sure had fun with their Halloween costumes, didn't they?" OK, it's a cute, clever ending. However, if you recall, during the sketch these parents were trying to cause bodily harm to these creatures. They wouldn't have done that if they were aware that the tormentors were actually their children dressed in costumes. The finale doesn't blend with the story that was told. It contradicts it.

Looking for this defect in the pieces you watch can teach you to be careful with the resolutions that you write.

As you watch various sketches, be extra critical of the endings. Some will be good; others not so good. Try to analyze them and learn from the good ones what elements should go into a solid finale. Also, learn from the not-so-good ones and the elements you should avoid in bringing your sketches to an effective conclusion.

Sketch Writing Exercises

In chapter 13 I listed several reasons why you should do some joke writing exercises. Those thoughts apply to sketch writing, too. Rather than repeat them, let's get right into some exercises that you can begin to work on.

It needs a new ending: I warned you that this suggestion, or some variation of it, almost always comes back from the head writer with the sketch notes. You might as well practice it starting now.

Select any one of the sketches you watched or read and imagine that you wrote it and submitted it. The sketch ending is probably a pretty good one since this sketch actually aired on some show. However, that's not going to get you off the hook. The authorities are demanding a new finale. You have to provide it.

Take whatever sketch you selected and begin working on a new ending or possibly several alternate endings. Even if you believe this ending is excellent, still try to improve on it. Who knows? You could surprise yourself.

The new endings can be variations on the one that is already part of the sketch, or they can be totally different. That's your option. Also, you may have to do some rewriting within the body of the sketch in order to accommodate the new resolution. You can either write them now or simply note in the sketch where the rewrites will be necessary and what they should accomplish. Changing sections of the original sketch is OK provided you don't make such drastic edits that you are, in effect, writing a totally new piece.

Now you need a new sketch: OK, you've successfully doctored the previous sketch and gave the head writer and the producer the delicious ending that they were after. Congratulations. Job well done. However, now your desk is clear. You have nothing in the typewriter. Now that same head writer and producer want you to come up with some new sketch ideas that you can write.

Your assignment now is to come up with four to six premises that you can present at your next meeting. You can get the ideas from anywhere—pet peeves of yours, some incident that recently happened, some story you read about in the paper, a joke you heard that you feel can be converted into a sketch, a parody on

a classic, or perhaps just from divine inspiration—but get the ideas you must.

Prepare to explain your sketch ideas in a meeting with the head writer and the producer. First, define the premise briefly—in a sentence or two. However, make sure the idea is strong enough to convince them that it will be effective. Also give them an idea of where the fun in the sketch will come from. You may even present a joke or two that could be in the sketch, but be sure that the jokes are strong enough. You don't want a good idea rejected because one or two of the jokes you hastily presented were weak (that happens).

Also, you may try to suggest how the sketch could end.

You sold them on your sketch idea: You have a decided advantage now that you wouldn't have if you were actually trying to get a sketch idea approved. You have the right of approval. Also, you get to decide which of your ideas you will accept. That's a luxury most staff writers would sell their agent for. So take advantage of the opportunity.

Select one of the ideas you presented and give yourself the go-ahead on it.

Write a first draft of the sketch.

How about coming up with a short bit: You learned about this form of sketch in chapter 16. There we used Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?" and Johnny Carson's "Copper Clapper Caper" that he performed with Jack Webb as illustrations of the form. David Letterman's "Top Ten List" is another example of a bit.

Now the head writer and the producer are asking you to come up with a funny bit for a future show (aren't these guys starting to get on your nerves a bit?). Your assignment now is to try to come up with a funny, one-joke sort of routine. Use your creativity.

Go through the same process as you did for the above exercises—present four to six ideas, select one, and write it out.

I'm not happy with that line: It's not at all unusual for someone—a performer, a head writer, a producer, or even a fellow writer—to say, "I'm not happy with this line." Once that's said, you'd better begin coming up with new ideas and writing them into the margin of your script. Often the new line request will come between tapings or even while the show is being taped before a live audience. You'll need the new lines almost immediately.

As practice for that, this exercise is asking that you review one of the sketches you watched or read and note several places where a line could be improved. Even if you personally feel that nothing could be funnier than that line, try to

make it funnier anyway.

Once you mark those spots in the script, come up with several alternate funny lines for each one.

It's too long/It's too short: There are sketches that are aesthetically too long. They're funny for a while, but then they wear out and lose their effectiveness. That's a flaw in the writing or the production that should be corrected. Conversely, there are sketches that have more potential than has been written. Those sketches can sustain themselves longer. Again, the writing or the production should correct that.

However, television is a medium that is governed by time. A show must begin on the hour and end on the half hour or the hour. Naturally, there are prescribed times for commercials during the show's airtime. So sketches, even well-written sketches, must be shortened or lengthened to fill the allotted time.

For this exercise, take one or two of the written sketches that you have collected. Your assignment now is to cut one page from that sketch. Make sure that your deletions are *seamless*. You don't want abrupt changes in the final sketch. You also want to make sure that any deletions you make won't drastically affect any other portions of the piece.

Of course, this doesn't mean that you must cut a page in its entirety. But you may cut a speech or two here, a bit of action there. You do this throughout the sketch so that it totals a full-page cut.

For the second part of this exercise, add a page to one of the written sketches you have collected. Here again, you don't add an entire page. You make certain speeches longer or add several speeches. Do this over the entire piece until you've added a page in total.

Part Three: Sitcom Writing

A Brief Introduction to Sitcom Writing

There's a reality about sitcom writing that is often difficult for comedy writers to believe and to accept. Sitcom is the truncated version of the term "situation comedy." Notice in that title that the word "situation" gets top billing. That's the hard part for us comedy writers—we always expect comedy to take precedence. In this case it doesn't. The story is the main factor; the comedy is secondary.

The gags are necessary, of course, but they are governed by the story that is being told. The humor should come out of the situation and the characters. The story must be logical, credible, and interesting in order for the jokes to work.

Therefore, the primary consideration in writing a sitcom is to develop a powerful tale. The jokes will flow from that.

The story should be interesting. It's what keeps the viewers watching so that they can hear the uproariously funny gags you've written. The story should move at a compelling pace. The dialogue drives the story. As a writer, it's important that you keep the dialogue crisp and moving forward. Try to write in such a way that each line of dialogue leads to the next line of dialogue.

It should also be consistent with your story line and your characters. Each person in your play should say only what he or she would say, when he or she would say it, and in a manner that he or she would say it.

Sitcom writing also involves selling. In the beginning, you must sell your talent by getting your product to the marketplace. Let the industry know that you're a talented writer and that you have the product to prove it. That's done through the "spec script."

Then you also must sell your various story ideas to producers. You do this by preparing good story premises and "pitching" them at script meetings.

Both of the above concepts should become part of your self-teaching program.

How to Watch Sitcoms

Similar to joke writing and sketch writing, you will teach yourself to write professional-quality situation comedies by watching what the professionals have written. As Yogi Berra sagely stated, “You can observe an awful lot by just watching.”

However, there are many sitcoms on television, both on the networks and on cable. Which ones should you watch? The first suggestion is to watch them all—the good, the bad, and the ugly. When I was writing and producing television sitcoms, all of the writers in the profession would be sure to see each of the new shows that aired during any one season. We all wanted to be aware of the competition, what was being done by other production companies. We also wanted to evaluate the other shows—which ones were done well, which ones had a chance of high ratings, and so on. Part of our interest, too, was that we could then talk about the shows the next day over our morning cup of coffee. I will admit that there were many that we watched only once.

Likewise, it’s a good idea for you to familiarize yourself with what is happening in the industry. Get to know as many shows as possible. Some you may enjoy; others you won’t. A few you may actually detest. Nevertheless, you should watch and learn.

You may wonder what benefit there is in watching shows that you consider inferior. Once Phyllis Diller was a guest on a daytime talk show. The host and the other guests on that show were amateur musicians. The host formed them into a group to play a tune or two. Phyllis was playing the saxophone. When they began, Phyllis blew into the horn and a horrific sound came out. It was a sound that would jar the fillings out of your teeth. The other guests reacted in horror and, of course, the audience laughed.

The others all stared at Phyllis Diller and she said, “What exactly didn’t you like about it?” It was a funny ad-lib, but there was some wisdom contained in that statement. Some of the shows may be as painful to watch as Phyllis Diller’s note was to listen to. But that’s exactly the question you should ask: “What exactly didn’t I like about them?”

Think about your reaction a bit and try to learn from it. Was the play unbelievable? Were the reactions forced and hokey? Was the dialogue trite? Were the jokes subpar? Was the story line weak? There could be countless reasons why you were unimpressed with this show. Note them and don't include them in your writing.

In a sense, writing well means not writing badly. So seeing the mistakes of others should teach you not to make those same mistakes. That alone will improve the quality of your writing. Later, when we talk about spec scripts, we'll see how important it is for your scripts to be flawless, free of mistakes. An error-free spec script may be even more valuable to your career than a brilliantly written one. That may seem hard to accept, but we'll discuss the logic of it in chapter 23.

For now, though, get acquainted with most of the shows that are on television, learn to avoid obvious mistakes you see on the poorly written ones, and now progress to learning from the well-written shows. To help improve your writing, the best shows to study and analyze would be those that you particularly enjoy and appreciate. That should include shows that you feel are especially well constructed and written.

These are scripts that reflect your preferred writing style and sense of humor. These are also shows that you are enthusiastic about. Enthusiasm is a major factor of creativity. If you enjoy a certain show, you'll not only spontaneously write better material for it, but you'll also be more inclined to work harder to add some luster to your script.

I once worked for a head writer who handed out most assignments with a decidedly negative attitude. He disliked the show, the characters, and the story line he was assigning. By the time the writers left his office, they were turned off by the task they had, which was to complete a script that the head writer felt was not worthy of being written.

When you begin a project with a negative attitude, you really can't give the project all of the creativity it deserves. If you feel the show is not going to be any good anyway, why should you put in the effort to try to make it good? It's difficult to write without a positive, enthusiastic attitude.

Then I worked with head writers who had glowing opinions of you and the project they were assigning. It was a glorious and motivating feeling to work on a script that you felt was going to be a smash.

That's why it's good to select scripts and shows for your self-teaching that you are passionate about.

Remember, too, that you can learn from great shows of the past as well as the current crop of TV sitcoms. If you wanted to be a great novelist, it would serve you well to read Faulkner, Hemingway, Alcott, Austen, and other legendary authors. These are writers from the past, but their writing endures. You can still learn from them.

Likewise, you can learn from great sitcoms of years ago—*The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *I Love Lucy*, *Cheers*, *Taxi*. This is not to trivialize the current situation comedies but to point out that even shows that aired in the past can still help you in your writing development.

However, this leads to the next type of shows that you should watch.

Part of building a television sitcom writing career is writing the “spec script.” A spec script is one that’s written on speculation. That means no one asked you to write it, no one told you what to write, no one had to give approval before you could begin the writing, no one offered notes or suggestions, and, finally, no one is going to pay you for it. It’s a script that you write purely to show the industry your writing skills.

When you have a spec script that you’re satisfied with, you circulate it to the industry. You send it to agents, production companies, shows that are on the air—in short, anyone who’s in a position to offer you employment.

Realistically, spec scripts rarely sell. However, if they impress the agents or the producers, they do lead to story meetings. Here you’re invited in to pitch other stories, and this could well lead to a sale.

In order to write a spec script, you should watch and write for a specific show. You still should favor those shows that you personally like. Again, your enthusiasm about a show will help your writing. However, you should limit your choices to shows that are currently on the air. It would do you little good to submit a script written for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* or even *Cheers*. As I said earlier, you can study past shows to teach yourself to write, but it’s unwise to write spec scripts for shows that are off the air.

Even with current shows, you should try to choose ones that are popular or have high ratings. The people who are reading your submission will be familiar with these shows and can evaluate your writing more readily. If you select an obscure show, even one that you particularly like, chances are that the industry people won’t be as familiar with it as you are. So their judgment may not be valid.

So, to review, try to watch all that you can to familiarize yourself with what’s

happening in the industry and to learn from both the good and the bad. Select shows to study that reflect your preferences and probably your writing and humor style. If you are going to write a spec script to market, pick shows that you like, that are well known in the industry, and that are current.

What should you particularly look for in whichever show you decide to watch?

First, watch the shows for your overall reaction. Did you enjoy it? Did you laugh at it? Did you feel it was well written?

Second, look for specifics of the show's logistics. Does the show you're watching have a "teaser" and a "tag?" A teaser is a short beginning to the show. It can have something to do with the upcoming show or it can be a small joke that plays before the actual story begins. The tag is a short piece that ends the show. Again, it can come out of the main story, or it can simply be a final joke.

How many scenes does the show have and how long do they typically run? Some shows may feature several short scenes while others may have longer scenes that take you to the act break and then to the end of the show.

How many different sets are used during the show? Which are the most common ones? For example, *The Dick Van Dyke Show* usually featured the writers' office and the Petrie living room. Occasionally, you'd see the bedroom or kitchen of their house and once in a while, Alan Brady's office.

Does the show do any outside shooting or are all the scenes "interior?" For example, *All in the Family* was primarily shot indoors. *M*A*S*H*, on the other hand, often did outside shots.

Does the show regularly use guest appearances?

Notice the characters and how they relate to one another. What sort of lines does each deliver? What language do they use? For example, Archie Bunker on *All in the Family* spoke like a blue-collar worker, while Sheldon on *The Big Bang Theory* speaks like a Cal Tech Ph.D. You would never confuse the two of them.

Also, try to decipher why a given show works? What makes *Two and a Half Men* a hit? Why is *The Big Bang Theory* popular? Is it the story lines? The zaniness of the characters? The clever dialogue? Give it some thought.

Finally, while you're watching a sitcom or reading from a script that you have available, map out an outline of the entire show—scene by scene, plot point by plot point. By doing this you've detailed a road map of the entire episode. You've tracked it from beginning to end, listing all the twists and turns in the story.

As a result, you have an outline of the entire script. You have the basic skeleton that was fleshed out by the action and the dialogue. As an example, here's an outline that I wrote out for one of the opening shows of *Bewitched*. Most readers are familiar with that show.

Opening Teaser

A montage of scenes showing how DARRIN STEPHENS and SAMANTHA meet, fall in love, and marry. It shows them in their honeymoon suite where we reveal that Samantha is a witch.

ACT I

Scene 1 - Honeymoon Bedroom:

We see Samantha in her dressing gown in the honeymoon suite bedroom. Her mother, ENDORA, magically appears. She's not happy with the wedding, wants to break it up.

Scene 2 - Hotel Lobby:

Darrin in his robe is about to enter the honeymoon bedroom. Endora magically transports him to the hotel lobby. He attributes it to too much champagne and gets a key to his suite from the hotel desk clerk.

Scene 3 - Honeymoon Bedroom:

Samantha tries to magically make her mother disappear, but her mother's magic is strong enough to resist Samantha's spells.

Scene 4 - Hotel Lobby:

Darrin is about to knock on the honeymoon suite door but again is transported to the hotel lobby where he is "knocking" on the desk clerk's bald head. He gets the key again.

Scene 5 - Honeymoon Bedroom:

Finally, Endora leaves of her own free will but with a decided resolution to end this marriage.

Scene 6 - Honeymoon Suite Living Room:

Darrin and Samantha finally are alone together. She wants to talk. She reveals that she's a witch. He doesn't believe her. He attributes it to the champagne. She has to prove it to him. She does a series of small tricks—lights his cigarette, keeps moving the ashtray, and others. He finally believes her but feels they can work that out, provided she stops performing magic.

Scenes 6, 7, and 8 - A Montage of:

Darrin having a drink with his best friend in a bar, seeking help in dealing with being married to a witch. The friend gives a lecture about marriage but never really hears Darrin. Then he leaves.

Darrin seeking the help of his doctor. When he says he's married to a witch, the doctor advises some vacation time.

Darrin telling a bartender that his wife is a witch. The bartender says, "You should see my wife."

Scene 9 - The Stephenses' Living Room:

Darrin speaks with Samantha and tells her that he's thought it over and loves her so much that he will stay married to her despite her witchcraft. She's delighted. Yet he makes her promise to abandon her magic spells. She agrees.

ACT II

Scene 1 - Darrin's office:

Sheila, an old flame, visits Darrin unexpectedly. He announces that he's married and she seems happy for him. She invites him and his bride to an informal dinner that evening with other friends.

Scene 2 - Outside Sheila's Home:

They ring the doorbell as Darrin assures Samantha that

the evening is casual.

Scene 3 - Inside Sheila's Home:

It's apparent that everyone is dressed formally. Sheila assures Samantha that her dress is appropriate, very sensible. It's apparent that Sheila is going to be catty.

Scene 4 - Sheila's Dining Room:

During the dinner, Sheila is polite to Samantha, but every comment turns out to be a put-down. Samantha endures it but obviously grows more and more annoyed. At one point she repeats her resolve not to cast any magic spells, but eventually, she surrenders to the temptation.

She . . .

- Arranges for one lock of Sheila's hair to always fall out of place.
- Causes her to get food prominently stuck in her teeth
- Moves her soup bowl so that Sheila inadvertently puts her elbow into it.
- Makes her sneeze so hard that she sprays food all over and splits her formal dress up the back.
- Causes the maid to spill a tray of food in her lap.
- Causes the front door to open so that a gust of wind comes in blowing Sheila's wig off.

Sheila finally runs upstairs, humiliated. Samantha continues eating, looking smugly innocent.

Closing Tag - The Stephenses' Kitchen:

Darrin and Samantha enter the kitchen having come home from the party. Darrin explains that he understood why Samantha pulled those tricks, but he does remind her that she broke her promise to him. She agrees not to do it again. Darrin is pleased but wants her to go up

to bed with him. She claims she has to clean up the messy kitchen first. She surveys the mess and with a wave of her hands the kitchen is immediately spotless. She has a satisfied look and goes off to meet Darrin in the bedroom.

THE END

Of course, this is a writer's version of Monday morning quarterbacking. You've mapped out a show that's already been written and produced. However, it's good practice to do this, because later, when you write a script, you will lay out an outline like this *before* you begin writing. We'll get to that process shortly—after you've worked on a few sitcom writing exercises.

Sitcom Writing Exercises

Earlier in this book we suggested some joke writing and sketch writing exercises. Now it's time to try a few for writing situation comedies. For these exercises you should have some actual scripts in front of you.

If the scripts you have are not in the proper format, you should retype the text you have into a traditional sitcom script format. The best way to learn to do this is to obtain an actual television situation comedy script and measure the margins for stage directions and for dialogue.

Here's one page setup that you can use to type out a situation comedy script. Set the normal margins to one inch on each side of the page. That would be used for everything except the dialogue. Set the margins for the dialogue at two inches from the left side of the page and three and a half inches from the right side of the page. The speaker's name should be roughly centered above each speech. You can accomplish this by setting your tab bar at one inch in from the left dialogue margin. Everything should be double spaced.

With that housekeeping out of the way, let's work on a few exercises.

Keep it short, sweet, and to the point: Dialogue is the major writing tool in script writing. Your characters tell the story primarily with what they say. Of course, how they say it and what they're doing as they say it is important, but for the most part that's the chore of the actors or the director. The writer tells the tale principally with words.

Obviously, the words should be believable and consistent with the characters. However, you probably don't want to write "the way people speak." Whether you're writing a sketch, a sitcom, a stage play, or a film script, you will be limited by time. You must have your dialogue more compact and to the point than "the way people speak." Your stage or screen dialogue must be tighter than that.

If you listen to people saying good-bye on the telephone, you will notice how they elongate dialogue unnecessarily. It's not unusual for the dialogue to go something like this:

"Bye now . . . yeah, talk to you later . . . you say hi to everybody, too . . .

OK, nice talking to you . . . so long . . . bye,” and finally they hang up.

That’s usually “the way people speak.” You, the writer, can’t allow them to do that in your script.

Let’s get some practice now in keeping the dialogue short, sweet, and to the point. Select three pages of dialogue from any script you choose. Try to make sure that the pages aren’t cluttered with too much stage direction because this exercise is focusing on dialogue.

Now, without changing the meaning of the story, try to cut those three pages of dialogue down to two pages. If you can cut entire speeches without changing the story, do it. However, you will probably find that you’ll be truncating most of the speeches, eliminating words or phrases.

This may not be an easy task because you’re working from a script that presumably has been honed down to the bare essentials. Nevertheless, it’s good practice.

Have fun with it.

Keep the dialogue driving forward: Not only should the dialogue be concise and meaningful, but it should also pull the listener or the viewer through most of the action. Each line spoken should have a meaning and a purpose, and it should continue to drive the play forward. Well-written dialogue should feel as though every word is important and every line leads to the next line.

In order to get some practice in this writing technique, you should now create a short scene that takes a drastic change of direction. For example, some friends start out with a cheerful, pleasant conversation, and gradually that changes into a vicious dispute.

You might have a father picking up his daughter at the airport. She’s coming home from college, both are obviously glad to see each other, and they engage in happy dialogue. Somewhere along the way, this conversation again deteriorates into a nasty disagreement.

Or you could try a customer making a large purchase in a store. The customer and the sales clerk are both glad the sale has been made and agree this was a fine purchase. As they celebrate, once again, the dialogue changes. They end up in a bitter dispute.

Or, if you like, the scene can start with an argument and gradually change to more pleasant conversation.

You’re free to devise any scene or situation you want, but arrange it so that you get some practice in allowing the dialogue to lead the story in the direction

you want it to go.

Know who says what: As a writer, you don't tell your story; you allow your characters to tell your story. However, your characters probably speak differently than you do. They have a different vocabulary, a unique arsenal of similes and metaphors. Their language may be more stilted or earthier than yours. So you can't put *your words* into their mouths; you must put *their words* into their mouths.

At the same time, each of the characters should be distinct from one another. They act differently; they react differently; they speak differently. In the classic *Gunsmoke* series, the way Matt Dillon would give orders to the desperadoes would be unlike the way Chester would address them. On *Mayberry R.F.D.* Sheriff Andy Taylor would handle a situation one way and Deputy Barney Fife would deal with it in another way. Even on a situation comedy that had an ensemble cast like *Cheers*, each cast member was unique. Sam Malone had dialogue that was not like Coach's. Carla, Norm, Cliff, Woody, Frasier—all of them had unique dialogue traits.

As a practice exercise in giving characters their distinctive voice, select one scene from a written script that you have available. The dialogue is solid, well written, and appropriate for each character. Now, without changing the story content, drop one of the characters from this scene.

This means that you'll probably have to reassign some of that character's dialogue to someone else. However, you can't transfer the line because the new character wouldn't say the line the same way the deleted character would.

In this exercise, you have to maintain not only the content of the scene, but also the fidelity of the dialogue to each character.

Not here, but there: Somehow I remember a joke I heard on a sitcom once. One character asks another, "What are you doing here?" The response was "Everybody has to be somewhere." That's pretty much true in writing a situation comedy, too—every character has to be somewhere. That somewhere—that location—often influences the action and the dialogue of the teleplay.

As an exercise, you should take any scene from a script that you have available. That scene will take place somewhere. It may be the family living room, the coffee shop where the people often meet, the bar where they congregate—someplace.

For this exercise, you should rewrite that scene in a different location. You want to convey the same information so that it fits into the overall story, but you

want to do it in a different setting.

Much of the dialogue and the action may remain the same and that is perfectly all right for this exercise. However, some of the dialogue or action may have to change simply because it's happening in a new place.

Be sure to keep the story flowing, but keep it consistent with the new location.

There's nothing wrong with funnier: Although we've agreed that the story is the most important element in sitcoms, we should remember that the word is a shortened form of "situation comedy." Yes, the "situation" gets top billing, but the "comedy" is an important factor in the effectiveness of the script. The comedy should be consistent with the situation, but it must be there nonetheless.

Here's an exercise that should help you reestablish the importance of the humor in the script. Take any sitcom script that you have available and try to insert a new joke at about every third page. The new gag can be an insert or a rewrite of one that is already there. And of course, you would insert them at *an average* of every third page. Your script should probably run anywhere from forty-two to forty-eight pages long. So you're writing about fourteen to sixteen gags.

Many writers have said that the story is paramount. If you have a good premise, the joke writing should be easy. With this exercise, you should find out.

Have fun with it.

Develop a Situation Comedy Story and Outline a Script

Throughout this book you've been both teacher and student. Now you're ready for a promotion. You're about to become your own producer.

As the producer, you're going to invite yourself to a pitch session. A pitch session is a meeting in which you, the writer, attempt to sell a story idea to the producer (in this case, also you). At a pitch session, you will meet with the producer or the head writer or a combination of both. Usually several other people will attend these gatherings. There will be those people you want to impress with your story and your writing ability, and there will also be a bunch of other people. You'll have no idea what they do or why they're there. You don't really care. You want to sell to whichever one has the power to buy.

For our mythical meeting, though, there will be just you, the writer, and you, the producer.

This meeting has two purposes. The first is for the producer (to get story ideas and scripts for the show he or she is producing. That's why the producer has invited you to the office and is giving you this time and attention. As I mentioned earlier, the meeting could involve the head writer or script supervisor—in short, the person who has the authority and the budget to say yes. Just to simplify, I'll refer to this person as “the producer.”

The second purpose is for you, the writer, to sell a story and write a script.

The producer has already prepared for this meeting by determining that you are a writer that he or she would trust to write a script for this show. The producer decided on that by some means, maybe by reading a spec script that you sent in, maybe by having an agent promote you and your talents, or maybe by having other writers or producers recommend you. Whatever happened before, the producer is willing to listen to your ideas and, if they're workable, to offer you a contract.

You, the writer, though, now have to prepare for this meeting. You have to go in with stories, several of them. And they should be ideas that would work for

this specific show. Part of your preparation for a successful pitch session is familiarizing yourself with the show and the characters in it.

In actuality, you would have no control over which show you would be pitching ideas for. In our mythical practice session, though, you have complete control. You can create premises for any show you like. I would recommend that you select one that you are particularly passionate about. This presumes that you have watched the show fairly regularly and know a bit about it. You know the characters and their traits, and you're probably familiar with the type of story lines that would work on this show. Also, you have enthusiasm, and that's a valuable weapon in the writer's arsenal.

Your first step in preparing for this meeting is to come up with workable premises that are appropriate for this particular show. You'll need several—usually, anywhere from three to six. You might ask, “If they're all good premises, why do I need so many?” Because as salable as they are, there's a good chance that someone else has thought of them, too. The one comment that you will hear most often at pitch sessions is “Stop, we're already doing a story like that.” A variation on that is “That's a good idea, but [some other show] aired an episode a few weeks ago that was very similar.”

Once an idea is shot down, you should be able to come back with another one. That's why you need several in your pocket.

Those, then, are the first steps you should take in getting ready for this fictional meeting—select the show you'll be selling to and create five or six premises to pitch. You've already learned how to watch various sitcoms with a purpose. However, there's no way to learn what a pitch session is like simply by watching the show. Following are a couple of tips that should help you:

First, make sure your premise is solid and believable. Make sure, too, that it is consistent with the show you're attempting to sell to. Second, it's not a bad idea to include in your pitch that one moment that causes concern. I call it the “Uh-Oh Moment.” This is the plot point where the trouble begins. This is the point where you almost paint yourself into a corner. This is where you want the producer to be intrigued enough to want to find out how you're going to get yourself and your characters out of this fix.

Let me give an example. On *The Andy Griffith Show*, you might pitch a story that concerns Deputy Fife initiating a “zero-tolerance” campaign against traffic violations. A rich-looking car is parked in a no-parking zone. Deputy Fife begins writing a ticket and also giving a speech about “how laws are made to be followed and as long as he's deputy, no one gets a free pass—not rich people who

drive big luxury cars, not even the governor himself.” Then the chauffeur reveals that it actually is the governor’s car. Uh-oh! Now Barney loses face if he backs down but could lose his job if he issues the ticket.

Once you’ve prepared five or six credible and appropriate premises with that critical turning point, type them out briefly. A paragraph or two should be plenty. It’s always a good idea to have something written that you can leave with the producer.

Now you proceed to your imaginary pitch session. You, as the producer, select one of the stories to purchase. (Isn’t it nice to be both the writer and the producer? You have a guaranteed sale.) You ask the writer to return in a week or two with a full outline of that particular story.

Now your task is to convert your premise into a full story complete with a plot-point-by-plot-point outline. How do you do this? Again, your best instructor is your TV set. In chapter 19 we suggested that as you watch shows, you break them down into their basic outlines. As you watch more and more sitcoms and jot down the plot points, you’ll begin to get a feel for how plots are structured and how stories are told most effectively.

There’s no real formula for structuring your story. It’s a process that develops as you go. I liken it to molding an image out of clay. Say you want to form a portrait of Abraham Lincoln from clay. You begin with a clump of clay and start to shape it, to mold it into some form that resembles a head. If you need more clay, you add it. If you have too much clay, you carve some away. You smooth it, move it around, and work with it, until it begins to look like a statue of Lincoln. It’s a fluid process that is constantly changing.

You do pretty much the same in molding a sitcom script. If you need back story, you add it in. If you need more conflict, you create it. If it’s time to resolve your story, you resolve it. If whatever you add doesn’t seem to work, you can remove it and try another approach. It’s constant molding.

Where do you start? Anywhere. Some writers prefer to begin at the beginning and develop the tale chronologically from start to finish. That’s fine. Others may have a specific ending in mind. They start there and build the story to lead up to that ending. You may prefer to start somewhere in the middle and add details that lead to this point and events that result afterward.

Take the story of “Cinderella” as an example. You want her to be an oppressed stepdaughter tormented by her stepsisters and her stepmother. So you could start by figuring out how Cinderella would find herself in that position. That’s a fine way to start building the story. Now you can add plot points that

lead up to her having a happy ending, in fact, a “happily ever after” ending. You create the invitation to the royal ball, the handsome prince who is looking for a kind and beautiful bride, the fairy godmother who makes all the arrangements, and the glass slipper that Cinderella conveniently leaves behind.

Or you could work from the ending back toward the beginning. Cinderella meets and falls in love with a handsome prince who in turn falls in love with her. How can someone as lowly as Cinderella meet royalty? Easy. At the royal ball.

But you need some conflict, so you go back and make Cinderella an outcast in her own family. She’s hated by her stepmother and stepsisters. That makes it more dramatic when she wins out in the end.

Now, though, you have a new problem : How can Cinderella even attend the royal ball? You introduce a fairy godmother to take care of all the sticky details. She designs her gorgeous costume and provides an exquisite coach pulled by four white horses and driven by a uniformed coachman.

So Cinderella goes to the ball and dances with the prince, and they fall in love instantly. However, you feel this story needs more complications. So you create one: Cinderella must return home before the stroke of midnight or all the magic evaporates.

So now you have a fairy godmother who can create a gown from nothing, turn a pumpkin into a golden carriage, transform four mice into white stallions, and change a lizard into a well-dressed coachman. She can do all that, but she can’t negotiate an extension on the midnight deadline.

You know the rest of the story. The point here is that either approach could work.

Now forget Cinderella and go back to the premise you sold. Start somewhere, anywhere, and begin to mold it into a story that makes the point you want to make. It will require talent, imagination, and hard work. You’ll progress by trial and error. If you don’t have enough conflict, you may have to go back and add some earlier in your story. If you need a villain, you may have to introduce another character. You change, you improvise, you develop, and that’s how you build a workable story outline.

Write a Situation Comedy Script

Now it's time to write. As author Hugh Prather noted, "If the desire to write is not accompanied by actual writing, then the desire is not to write." This will be your *actual writing*. This is still part of your self-education because each time you write, you learn. You learn something about writing, about your writing, and about yourself.

In the previous chapter, you devoted considerable time and creative thought to workable premises for sitcoms and then you developed those into complete story outlines. Now you should select one of those outlines—the one you have the most confidence in—and convert it to a fully written first draft.

The term "first draft" doesn't imply that you should treat it cavalierly. First draft does indicate that there will be subsequent edits. However, it shouldn't give you the impression that since changes will follow, you needn't refine your writing as perfectly as you can. In fact, you should treat your first draft as your final draft. It won't be, but to you, it should be.

You've probably heard the expression "You don't get a second chance to make a first impression." Well, it's often true also that you may not get a chance to write a second draft if your first draft doesn't deliver powerfully.

A good first draft may lead to many other drafts, up to and including the "as broadcast" script. A careless first draft may stop right there.

Here's a personal tale that illustrates how important a first draft is and also how easily changes are incorporated into that script:

My partner and I sold a story to a popular, high-rated situation comedy. We were working on a variety show at the time, but we wanted to build some credits in the sitcom field because variety seemed to be a disappearing genre.

We worked on the script during our spare time and turned it in to the producers, who had offices down the corridor from our variety show offices. Each time we passed in the hall, the executive producer told us how much he liked our script and that we should come down and pitch other ideas.

We wanted to but didn't have the time.

Finally, the show we had written aired. We watched it and discovered that one line in the show was ours. Only one line of the “brilliant” script we had written survived until tape day. In other words, our first draft was changed, edited, mauled, rewritten, ravaged until only one single joke line remained intact.

It’s not boastful to say that ours was a good script because the producers pleaded with us to write more. It must have impressed them. Then why the exhaustive changes?

First, the writing staff of the show will read over any freelance script and offer suggestions. Many of these will be incorporated into the script. Then the first step in production is the table reading, where the performers, the writers, and the crew read through that week’s script. Many of those involved will offer changes to the script. Writers may see and suggest possible story line or joke improvements. Performers will offer changes to their lines.

These edits are introduced and implemented so gradually that they are hardly noticed. However, they can accumulate during the week of production to the point where only one original line makes the cut.

Nevertheless, the original first draft was strong enough to warrant calling the writers in for additional story meetings. That’s why your first draft should, in essence, be your *final draft*.

Looking back on our script, we might have said that since practically every line on our pages would be changed, why should we struggle to make the lines powerful, to make the story flow logically. Why don’t we just write mediocrity since they’re going to change it all anyway?

Had we done that, the script would probably have been rejected as soon as we turned it in.

That’s the point of this anecdote—you should write a script that is flawless and brilliant. You as a freelance writer cannot control what changes will be made to your script once you submit it, but you can control the quality of the script you are submitting. You should determine to make it the best story and script you can. You should do that even though it’s still called the “first draft.”

Let’s take this thought one step further. This script is not only your first draft, but it’s also only your first script. As we said earlier, each time you write you learn something. Presumably, your second script will be better than your first. Your third will be better than the first two. It doesn’t always follow that strict a pattern, but on average, your writing should get better and better the more you write. Therefore, it’s to your benefit to write several scripts at this stage of your self-education.

In his autobiography, Neil Simon claims that the first play he wrote was rewritten eleven times. That's misleading. Neil Simon says that the play wasn't *rewritten* eleven times; he actually *wrote the entire play* eleven times. The book incidentally was titled *Rewrites*.

That play, of course, made it to Broadway and began Neil Simon's career as arguably the greatest comedy playwright of all time.

The magic number for Neil Simon was eleven. You have no way of determining what that magic number will be for you until you reach it. It may be your third script that sells. It may be your ninth. The important thing to keep in mind is that you can't reach your magic number unless you write those scripts that come before it. In other words, the only way you can get to the magic third script is to write two others before it. You can't reach the magic ninth script unless you write eight other scripts before it.

Let me recount another anecdote to explain:

A writing colleague of mine admired a certain producer and wanted to write scripts for him. He studied this producer's shows and finally completed a spec script and sent it to this gentleman. To the producer's credit, he read the script and was generous enough to write a multipage letter listing several flaws in the script and suggesting edits that might improve it.

The writer, though, was not happy with his first script. He immediately began to write a second spec script that he was determined would be better than the first. He completed it and sent it to the same producer.

The producer received the second submission, read it, called his own agent, and said, "Contact the writer of this script. I want him to work for me."

The irony is that the two letters crossed in the mail. The second script was on the way to the producer while the letter critiquing the first script was on its way to the aspiring writer. Consequently, the suggestions in the critique had no effect on the second script. It was better because the writer had learned, on his own, from the flawed first script.

The happy ending was that the producer not only hired this writer but on subsequent shows teamed with him as coproducers.

The moral of the tale: Keep writing until you get it right. It may take a few false starts, but then doesn't everything?

However, none of this advice is applicable until you get the first script written. It's been proved time and time again that you can't write your second script until you've written a first script. Your third script can't be started until the first and

the second are completed.

So review your favorite premise and outline from the previous chapter and begin writing your situation comedy script.

Have fun with it.

Errors to Avoid in Writing a Spec Script

The spec script is the gateway to a career in television sitcom writing. To reiterate, a spec script is a full situation comedy written purely on speculation. You have neither a contract nor a guarantee of a sale. What you do have is desire, determination, enthusiasm, talent, and the ability to write a representative script.

You then distribute that script to agents or production companies. The idea is that your writing will impress someone enough to invite you to further meetings with the possibility of selling an idea for a story and landing a writing contract.

That's the path that most people take to a TV writing career.

The first requirement, obviously, is that you write a spec script. Without that step, the rest of the process is impossible. In fact, you may have to create *several* spec scripts. Your first attempt may not be good enough. Your second one may not impress the buyers either. And so it may go until you produce one that is effective enough to influence the readers.

The second requirement is that someone with hiring power reads your script. It may seem that step is completely out of your hands. In a sense, it is; in another sense, though, it isn't. In order to explain that, let's discuss the readers of your spec script.

The person reading your script is reading plenty of other scripts also—perhaps too many other scripts. I remember my first day as a TV producer. The first chore was to read through all of the scripts that had been submitted by freelance writers or their agents. Several stacks of them were lined up. It might have taken the entire season just to read all of them. The reality is that readers only read the script until they can find a reason not to read it anymore. Then, that script is tossed into the “reject” bin, and the next script is opened and read until there's a reason to reject it.

This is not meant to discourage you. In fact, it should encourage you. Getting your script read from front cover to back cover is a solid sign that you will be invited to a meeting and you will become a television writer. The key is getting your script read in its entirety.

As I said, the readers read the script until they can find a reason not to read it anymore. I also said that though it may seem that this step is completely out of your hands, it really isn't. You do have some control over this process. The control you have is the ability to write a script that doesn't give the reader a reason to stop reading. You can do that by avoiding those flaws that prompt a reader to toss the script into the reject stack.

The following are a few of those errors to avoid:

First, your script should be typed in the proper format. It should look like a professionally written script. This may seem basic, but I'll state it anyway: All scripts should be typed. Handwritten submissions almost certainly will not be considered. They may be fantastically creative and brilliantly executed, but they won't be read. If you don't type and are forced to write your scenes in longhand, pay to have them typed or have a friend retype them for you. Whatever you do, submit only typed scripts.

The typing should be done in the proper format. This doesn't mean that you have to be meticulous about each and every detail. But it does mean that each page should look like it was written by a professional writer.

One way to learn the proper format is to obtain a script from a television show. See how the page is laid out. Check the margins for stage directions and for dialogue. Then duplicate that format on your pages.

Another way, though, is to get a book that teaches you the correct submission form. Go to a bookstore and pick up a book that teaches manuscript formats. Check booksellers on the Internet. I just checked Amazon.com for "manuscript format" and found three books listing format guides for all types of writing submissions—novels, book proposals, and TV scripts. In checking the "search inside this book" section, the table of contents showed extensive coverage of the proper formatting of situation comedy scripts.

Second, avoid old or "borrowed" jokes. You can imagine what you would do if you were reading a script and you came upon this dialogue:

SPEAKER 1

I was just wondering . . . why do you think
firemen wear red suspenders?

SPEAKER 2

Well, that's easy. It's to hold their pants
up.

You would toss that script quickly into the reject bin. You wouldn't need to read any further to decide that this writer is suspect. And that's one of the problems with using old or "borrowed" gags—it taints even the creative writing in the script. It makes the reader wonder how much of the script is actually original.

The firemen joke is an extreme example. It's such an old and well-known gag that hardly anyone would try using that in a script. Sometimes, though, you may be tempted to sneak in a more obscure joke. It's not worth it. Most of the readers are very up to date on comedy. They can usually spot material that's been done before. It's simply not worth the risk.

Third, just as you would avoid old or "borrowed" jokes, you should also avoid tired, hackneyed devices—ideas that have been done . . . and done . . . and done. When I went to work on *The Carol Burnett Show*, the head writer held a meeting with the staff and said, "You may use the bear suit occasionally, but you have to earn the right to use it."

Let me explain the point he was making. The bear suit was his representation of old, tired devices. In sketches, some people may be on a camping trip and as a joke will have a friend dress up in a bear suit to scare some of their colleagues. Then, of course, a real bear would come along, and that was the comedy device. It had been done before. It will be done again. But it is old, and tired.

The head writer was telling us that we could use some gimmicky devices, but we had to write some very clever sketches before that would be tolerated.

There are other "bear suit" ideas. For instance, the dream sequence in which some devastating events turn out to be merely a dream. It's been done.

As Carol Burnett's head writer warned us, you have to earn the right to use these devices. As a writer of a spec script, you're not yet entitled to that right. It's safer to avoid anything that feels like it has been done to excess. Even if you suspect that, rewrite that section of your teleplay. Otherwise, your script may quickly reach the reject pile.

Fourth, try not to use forced dialogue. Often in our eagerness to include jokes in our scripts, we create unwieldy straight lines. Straight lines are as important to your writing as the gags. In fact, it's often the straight line that determines the effectiveness of the joke. Lou Costello was a funny vaudeville and film comedian. Bud Abbott not so much. Dean Martin was an important factor in the comedy of the Martin and Lewis act. Yet while they were performing together he was not recognized as such. Jerry Lewis was the funny one. Both Costello's and Lewis's hilarious antics depended on the validity and the strength

of their straight men, Bud Abbott and Dean Martin, respectively.

In a similar way, the comedy in your sitcom script depends on the lines leading up to it.

The dialogue should be natural. It should flow from the situation and the characters. The jokes should be based on that dialogue.

In one Marx Brothers movie, they were on a ship and someone rushed up to Groucho and said something like, “There’s been an explosion. Four people are trapped below deck.” Groucho asked, “How do you know there are four of them?” The other person said, “Because they were singing ‘Sweet Adeline.’” That’s my reconstruction of the joke from memory. It’s not exact, but it is close enough to make my point, which is: Notice how awkward and unnatural the straight line question is. “How do you know there are four of them?” It’s there simply to set up the joke about a song that is noted for quartet singing.

Of course, the Marx Brothers were noted for this type of comedy, so the joke was fine for their movie. However, not many sitcoms are done in the Marx Brothers style. Straight lines that stand out so blatantly in a spec script are not recommended.

Fifth, steer clear of *contrived* action, too. Contrived action is that which feels out of place in the story and has been placed in there because the writer obviously needed an “out.” One extreme example of this was when I wrote a sketch for *The Carol Burnett Show*. I had no ending except for a pie in the face (which incidentally falls into the “bear suit” category we spoke of earlier). So in the script I actually wrote into the stage directions, A WAITER WALKS BY WITH A PIE. It was quite convenient, quite contrived.

It’s tempting to write in action that is equally convenient. You may need a person to get rid of a suitcase full of money, so you have him run into a stranger who happens to be carrying the exact same suitcase. He switches them. What are the odds of that happening? A person may lose his car keys. How do you resolve that? You could have a stranger approach and say, “I drive the same make of car and often the keys will work on other cars. Let’s try it.” They try it and it works. Rather convenient, right?

If you absolutely need a device like this, go back earlier in your script and set up a situation so that the offending scene won’t feel so contrived.

Sixth, avoid action that takes place in the wrong setting. Some shows feature much outside shooting; others don’t. For instance, *Cheers* focused mainly on the bar and *All in the Family* limited the action mostly to the Bunker household. Of course, other sets were used, but they were mostly soundstage sets as opposed to

location shots.

You wouldn't want to turn in a *Cheers* spec script where Sam Malone chases Norm through the streets of Boston. You wouldn't have Norm jump into a speedboat to make his escape while Sam jumps into another motorboat to continue the pursuit. That's not the normal shooting schedule for that particular sitcom. Including a sequence like that would prompt a reader to stop reading.

Seventh, it's unwise to introduce outside characters to star in your show. A major headache for a producer is keeping the cast—especially the stars—happy. Should a new character come in and outshine the regulars, it will make for an unhappy week of shooting. Believe it or not, stars have egos and they're quite protective of their status. A new cast member who out-funnies them would cause trouble.

Now you can surely think of many shows where new characters came along and made a great impression. Sometimes, they made such an impression that they were cast in their own spinoff shows. Certainly that happens, but it usually happens by design. The networks may ask the producer to create a spinoff show.

But it rarely happens by way of a spec script. The safest way to get your script read from front cover to back cover is to stick with the show's cast of characters as they exist now. Trying to create your own spinoff character could land your script in the reject bin.

Eighth, while we're on the subject of characters, it is also advisable that you accept them as they are. Dick Van Dyke was a writer on the *Alan Brady Show*. Readers would not look favorably on a script that called for Alan Brady to be fired and for Dick Van Dyke to take over as the performer who replaces Brady as the star of the show. Suzanne Somers was a delightfully naive character on *Three's Company*. A script that has her graduating from Cal Tech and becoming a rocket scientist would not be welcomed by the show's producers.

It can sometimes seem clever to reinvent the characters on a sitcom, and it may be. However, it's not wise to do it in your spec script.

Ninth, the characters not only should remain unchanged, but the show itself should also. Most sitcoms end pretty much the same way they started. There's a reason for that. The format of the show has been accepted by the audience, and it's unwise to change it for no reason. It would be presumptuous of a spec script author to fundamentally change the concept of the show. For instance, suppose you wrote a brilliantly funny script in which Archie and Edith Bunker had a bitter divorce. This show is loaded with laughs, but what do the producers do next week? Their show has been destroyed. Suppose you write a glorious script

in which Mary Tyler Moore is elected to the Senate. Wonderful, except that she can no longer work in the newsroom where the show takes place. You've destroyed the concept of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

The folks who read your spec script depend on this show for their livelihood. They would like it to continue forever. Your script is destroying the show. They won't look favorably on that.

Tenth, don't send the show over budget. One of the producer's tasks in television sitcom is to get a provocative, interesting, funny show on the air each week and still have enough money left over to do it again next week. Any spec script that will send the show over its weekly allowance labels the writer as amateurish.

That doesn't mean that you have to itemize your script and come to an acceptable cost. You actually have no idea what the budget for the show is or how much your script will cost to produce. Nevertheless, you should have a general appreciation of expenses. For instance, if you go to a party, you can generally tell whether it's a ritzy affair that cost a pretty penny or just a nice affordable get-together. You have to make the same guesstimate about the cost of your script.

If your script absolutely demands that Meryl Streep be one of the guest stars, you're sending the budget up. If you have scenes that must be shot on location in Paris, you're costing the show a tad too much. If your final scene calls for a twenty-three-car pileup on the Interstate, you may have to pay for it yourself.

By watching the show you're writing a spec script for, you'll get a feel for the budget. Keep your writing within that framework and you may get your script read all the way through.

This is a formidable list of things to avoid, but it is possible while working within these limitations to produce creative, interesting, funny scripts. That's what you must do to impress the buyers.

Once my agent called me with a job offer. It was for a show that I didn't particularly like and I told him so. He said, "So. Go to work there and make it better." That's your goal—to work in television sitcoms and make them better. However, you can't improve them until you follow the rules and get your foot in the door.

That's your immediate challenge.

Part Four: Graduation

Congratulations!

It would be nice now to begin accepting congratulations on your graduation. However, there is no graduation from this self-taught course. The learning process is ongoing and never ending. As you continue your writing, you'll undoubtedly reach out to excellent teachers, trainers, and mentors. Very few people ever attain world-class status in any endeavor without expert guidance. By all means seek out and utilize that blessing.

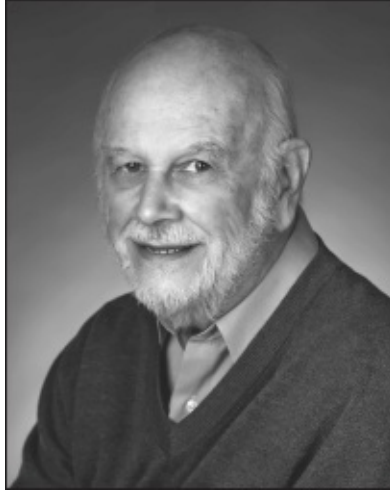
Nevertheless, continue with your self-education. Be willing throughout your career to observe, analyze, and replicate other accomplished practitioners, both past and contemporary. Persevere in learning from the masters of your craft.

Above all, work regularly with your exercises. These will help reestablish the fundamentals and enable you to discover and develop new skills regardless, and sometimes in spite of your success.

Once you teach yourself to write, you'll always be a writer. And as long as you are a writer, you will continue to teach yourself to write.

Have fun with this ongoing process and enjoy your writing career.

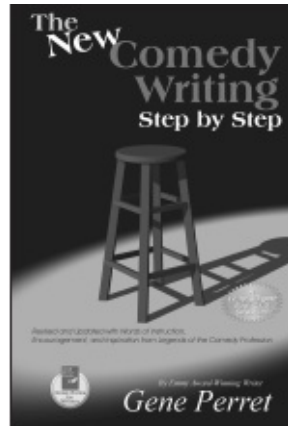
About the Author



Gene Perret taught himself to write comedy in the early 1960s by studying the technique and the writing style of the great comedians of the day, especially Bob Hope. This led to a television career writing for *The Jim Nabors Hour*, *Laugh-In*, *The New Bill Cosby Show*, *The Carol Burnett Show* and others. Later, he produced such hits as *Welcome Back Kotter*, *Three's Company*, and *The Tim Conway Show*. Gene was head writer for Phyllis Diller and worked with Bob Hope on all of his personal appearances and TV specials for thirty-eight years, the last twelve of which he served as Hope's head writer. Perret has won three Emmys and one Writer's Guild Award.

Using the comedy skills he learned, Gene became a public speaker, magazine columnist, and author.

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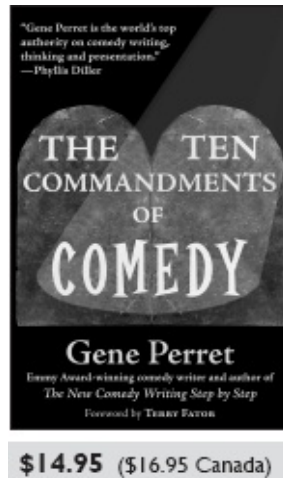


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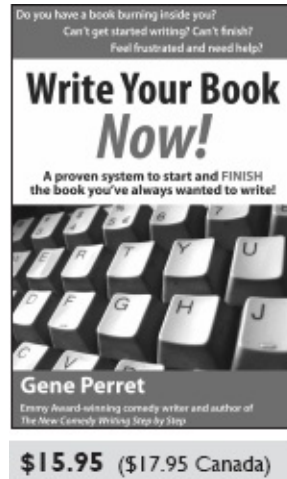
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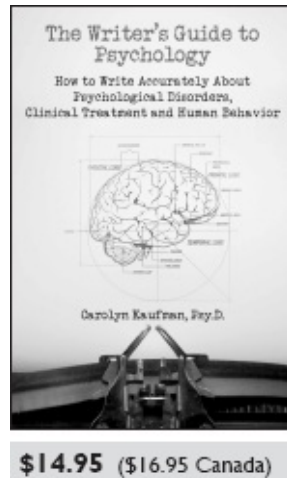


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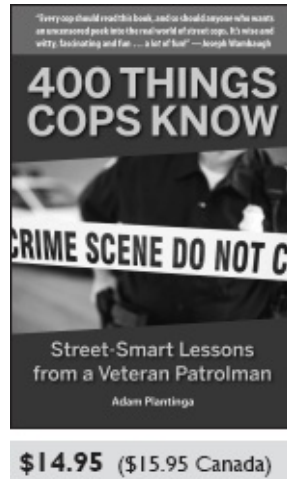
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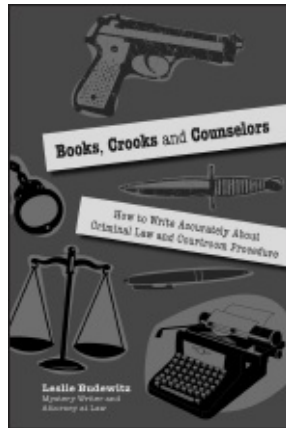


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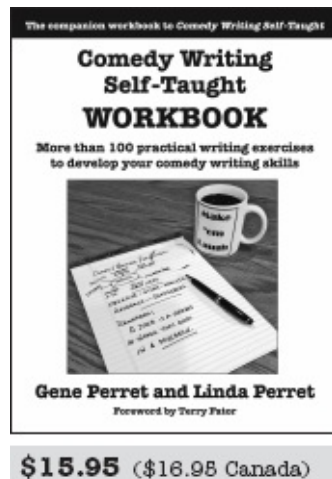
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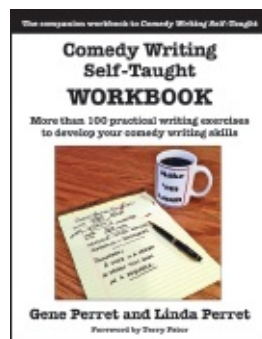
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